CAPTAIN BLAKE



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KING ★★★

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"The Indians marched and fought as never Indians marched or fought before."

[*Frontispiece.*] Page 302.

CAPTAIN BLAKE.

BY

CAPT. CHARLES KING, U.S.A.,

AUTHOR OF "THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER," "MARION'S FAITH," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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To the Memory

OF

CHARLES H. ROCKWELL,

CAPTAIN FIFTH U. S. CAVALRY,

WHO AS FRIEND, AS SOLDIER, AND AS GENTLEMAN, WAS WITHOUT REPROACH,

THIS VOLUME IS INSCRIBED.

PREFACE.

WHEN old friends meet after years of separation, there is in the glamour of reunion a something that hides for the moment the crow's-feet that have gathered and the lines that have formed in faces once fresh and fair. Later, however, when the first emotions of gladness have subsided and we note, unwillingly, the changes wrought by time, do we not often wish that we had kept unmarred the old ideals,—the old impressions of face and form and personality?

It is five years since Gerald Blake was introduced to those who cared to follow the fortunes of the —th Cavalry, but every month has brought its inquiries as to when and how more could be heard of him. And at last he comes again to make his bow to such indulgent friends, eager to meet and commune with them, no doubt; and yet faltering at the threshold.

Which will be first apparent,—which live longest in the thoughts of those who knew him then and now,—the old impressions of his own whimsical, kindly self, or the crow's feet and the lines of anxiety and care?

Loyal and generous in his every impulse, it is to be hoped that he may strengthen the friendships won long years ago. But, should he fail, the fault must lie, not upon his head, but that of his unworthy biographer.

THE AUTHOR.

April, 1891.

PRELUDE.

October in the Black Hills of Dakota. Cloudless skies. Golden sunshine. Keen, crisp, invigorating air. Lovely vistas of romantic valley, hemmed in by rugged heights, rock-buttressed, pine-crested. Clear, sparkling waters rushing over rocky bed, browsing herds of troop horses scattered here and there over the billowy slopes. Bivouac fires twinkling everywhere through the timber, sending their curling smoke high aloft towards the zenith. Rich, resinous, balsamic odors floating on the faint breeze that whispers through the tree-tops. Here, there, and everywhere groups of gaunt, hardy, bearded men, whose rough garb of canvas, flannel or dressed deer-skin gives no evidence of their calling. Only the parallel rows of white tents gleaming in the sunshine in the middle distance and the stirring peal of the bugle tell of the probable presence of a military force. There, down the valley where it widens slightly, the strong battalions of infantry have stacked their long Springfields and pitched their canvas abodes after a tramp through mud and mire, over ridge and mountain, under weeping skies or blazing suns for two thousand weary miles; and now, blissfully drinking in this perfect air, they rest from their labors. Here, closer at hand, swarm their comrades of the cav-

alry, haggard and unkempt as themselves, for they have lived for weeks on what game they could find and upon the stringy flesh of such horses as they were not able to tow along to the Belle Fourche. It has been the roughest of rough campaigns. It has worn them down to skin and bone. It has been replete with suffering one day and sharp fighting the next. But now, at last, in the recesses of the Southern hills, they are placidly waiting orders for the next move and the coming of a big command of recruits and fresh horses. It has been a fortnight of lazy delight, in which men and animals fed and dozed by day and slept dreamlessly upon the turf at night,—a fortnight in which evening after evening the troopers gathered about their fires, sang, told stories, and compared notes upon the experiences so fresh in every mind. There was a vast amount of incident to be talked over, for the campaign was full of event. All previous affairs, by common consent, seem dwarfed in comparison with the scenes through which they have so recently passed. There were days that indeed had tried men's souls, and there were souls that had been tried too hard for their strength. Ninety-nine out of every hundred among the officers and men now peopling this beautiful vale have borne themselves, despite exposure and starvation, gallantly and well; but there were those whose hearts had failed them after the dire disaster that befell the gallant Seventh, and the fate of Custer and his chosen fell like a pall over the spirits of men long used to war's alarms.

Here, where a deep wooded ravine cuts in among the rocky heights and sends down a foaming, swirling brook to swell the waters of the main valley, a group of officers

of the —th Cavalry have gathered about two comrades who have evidently just arrived, and the contrast between the appearance of the new-comers and that of the score of soldiers who have been through the campaign is something remarkable. Among the latter hardly a vestige of regulation uniform is to be seen. One old captain, to be sure, wears a battered forage-cap and a tattered blouse whose shoulder-straps have long since faded from gold to tarnished silver. Every other face, bearded and bronzed, peers out from under the brim of a slouched felt hat, drab or gray in color, and often riddled with rents and holes. The stalwart colonel has knotted a silk handkerchief about his neck and scorns coat of any kind. His blue flannel shirt, utterly destitute of ornament, is more the uniform of the command than anything in brass buttons could possibly be. He needs no badge of rank: every man in the three regiments of cavalry and the infantry battalions down-stream knows him as well as if he were decked with the double stars he wore at Appomattox, and, though his garb differs in no respect from that of the humblest trooper in the brigade, any man with half an eye would recognize him as its leader. He has turned to address in a low tone a word or two to the regimental adjutant, and the Mexican spurs on the heels of that officer instantly click together as he stands attention to his chief. A motley garb is that of this same staff official; a dark-blue shirt like that of his senior, a belt supporting revolver and hunting-knife; buckskin breeches, heavily beaded and fringed, thrust into the legs of cavalry boots, the feet whereof have long since worn away and are now replaced by Indian moccasins.

Among the twenty comrades surrounding the newcomers hardly one is any better off in point of costume; many are worse, yet this is one of the crack regiments of the service, and it has long been known as "the Dandy —th." Many an old friend of Arizona days is here: Jack Truscott, long the adjutant and now a beloved troop commander; bluff old Stannard, the junior major; Raymond, Turner, Gregg, Freeman, and Wayne among the captains; Billings, the adjutant; Wilkins, Crane, Carroll, and Hunter among the subs. Stanch old Buckets, the Arizona quartermaster, had been decreed with Colonel Pelham too much of a veteran for such tough campaigning as they might have to encounter, and so was left behind in May. And Billy Ray, the pet of the whole regiment, the idol of Wayne's squadron since their savage tussle with the Cheyennes in July, was now recovered from his wound, rescued from the toils that had been thrown about him during the early summer and coming to join his old regiment, bringing with him several new officers, nearly four hundred recruits, and over four hundred horses. He is now but a single day's short march away, and here are two of his officers sent ahead to warn the general of the coming of the command and to request instructions where to meet him, for it is well known that this very afternoon the cavalry breaks camp and moves away,—none but the tall brigade commander knows whither.

And it is an old friend who, laughing, joyous and jovial, is greeting man after man with hearty handshake and jubilant hail. He has the voice of a stentor, has Blake, and the legs of a spider; and with



"It is an old friend who, laughing, joyous, and jovial, is greeting man after man."

many a facetious comment he is introducing his companion to such of the regiment as have not yet known him, for Lieutenant Hollis has just come into the —th by transfer, and has hastened out with Ray's command to take his share in what may be left of the campaign. Both he and Blake are garbed in neat, trim-fitting fatigue uniforms, with high riding-boots and broad-brimmed campaign hats. Both are tall and slender, and Hollis is athletic, even elegant in build, a finer-looking fellow in every way than his companion, and a much younger man. The greeting accorded to both is frank and cordial. Many indeed, notably Truscott, Turner, and Billings, have grasped Blake's gauntleted hands in both their own and wrung them hard. They all know by this time how loyally he has stood by Billy Ray in his troubles of the summer past. In greeting the new subaltern, men who never before had met him raise the worn old felt hat and cordially extend the hand. Every man is ready enough to welcome a fellow who has long been striving to win a transfer to their rolls, and yet it is odd how speedily many of their number quit the group gathered here at the colonel's camp-fire and cluster about an object of much greater interest. A dozen yards away are two trim orderlies, dismounted and holding their own horses and those of the two officers; and it is the sight of these fat, sleek, beautifully-groomed sorrels, such marvellous contrast to the hundreds of gaunt, famished steeds herded along the valley, that bring these born cavalrymen in admiring throngs about them.

"Got any more sorrels like these, Blake?" shouts

Gregg in his resounding barytone. "Just what I want for my troop!"

"Ay, marry, that we have! and bays for Freeman and chestnuts for Turner. Ray's been parcelling out their paces all the way up, and every mother's son of them steps like a four-year old and shines like satin."

"That's a handsome beast you have there, Mr. Hollis," says the major, nodding approvingly at a big, pawing gray, and with his hands in his pockets old Stannard steps over to take a closer look.

"Yes, sir," answers Hollis, glad of such high endorsement of his choice; "I've had my eye on him a whole year, and have only just bought him. I was riding him every day when you went through. I couldn't live without just so much horseback exercise. It's one reason why I transferred. The doctors prescribed it in fact."

"Just hear that galoot, will you?" mutters Blake, savagely, between his teeth. "He is forever prating about his health, and he's as sound as a dollar."

Half a dozen men look up in sudden surprise. This is a new trait in Blake. Always laughing, ranting, poking fun at anything and anybody, they are all accustomed to his jibes, but not to such evident irritability. It is utterly unlike him.

"Why, everybody has spoken so cordially of Hollis, Blake," says Captain Turner, after an instant of silence. "Don't you like him?"

"Like him? Oh, Lord, yes! well enough,—only he's more kinds of an ass than I ever met before, and just now his fad seems to be his health. He has bored Ray and me almost to death about his lymphatic tem-

perament and what the doctors tell him. The youngsters have dubbed him 'Lymph' already, but he's so dense he sees no ridicule in it. What ho, bully rook!" he shouts, with sudden relapse into his old manner, as he steps quickly forward, all joviality again, to greet Captain Wayne, who, with Wilkins trailing behind, comes panting up the slope. "What are these, so withered, and so wild in their attire?"

"Did you bring plenty of bays, Legs? I want to say right here that if I don't get first choice there'll be a row."

"Thou Mars of malcontents! Listen to him now," laughs Blake. "Not so much as a 'how do you do?' for me, and nothing but anxiety for horseflesh. You old hippophagist! you've been living on it long enough this summer to need a change."

"I never ate a mouthful of it," protests Wayne, wrathfully. "I'd sooner eat my boots."

"Well, what did you live on? Have you been sucking your paws like a hibernating bear?"

"I've lived on the hope of seeing my troop mounted on new horses, nothing else," says Wayne, throwing himself down on the turf. "Legs, you look too swell for one of us. I don't mean your legs, man; when I say legs, I mean you."

"Thou dost belie me, Wayne! 'Tis but the combined effect of living in such high latitudes and on such low diet. A summer in Cheyenne, with such companionship as ours, would physic a Falstaff. Wait till we're back in Kansas this winter, and I'll show you a pair of legs Adonis might sigh for."

"A what?" asks Mr. Hollis, blankly.

"A man you never heard of, Tommy," answers Blake, winking significantly at Wayne. "He was first cousin to Antinous. Another stranger, I fancy. You never knew Ann, did you, Hollis?"

"Not that I know of," says Hollis. "The name doesn't seem familiar." But the silence in the group seems to give him an inkling that Blake is guying him again, and he flushes and looks uneasily around. Blake has been chaffing him more or less all the way from Cheyenne, and he does not know why. There is a pained expression in Truscott's face as he rises and betakes himself to where the colonel is seated on a stump, conversing with his staff-officers a few paces away. It was never like the old Blake to be playing upon the innocence or ignorance of a new-comer, and Truscott utterly disapproves of anything of the kind.

"What the mischief has got into Legs?" asks Turner, as he too rises and, joining Truscott, strolls away. "Do you suppose the summer's experiences have made him crabbed? I always heard Hollis was not over bright; but it isn't like Blake to be showing the fellow up in this savage way."

Truscott shakes his head, then turns back and calls to the new officer, who seems embarrassed and ill at ease, although a general chat has begun again. "Oh, Mr. Hollis, Captain Turner and I would like to look at your gray. Did you buy him in Cheyenne?" he hails, in cordial tone. And Hollis's eyes brighten, and he gladly joins the two troop commanders.

"Yes, captain, yes; I think I got him at a good bargain, too. Mr. Ray finally decided me to take him.

I believe he is considered as good a judge as we have in the —th."

"Oh, yes, Ray has no superior," answers Truscott, pleasantly. "Whoa, boy! let me look at your hoof," he says, as he bends down and picks up the gray's forefoot. "What do you call him, Mr. Hollis?"

"Well, I don't know just yet, captain. He has always been Jim, but I wanted something better,—something descriptive, you know. He seems too big and splendid a fellow to call Jim. I wanted something,—well, classical rather, like Bucephalus or Amphitrite, and I asked Blake. He tells me to name him Lymphititis; but it doesn't seem just the thing somehow."

Truscott bites his lip and bends lower over the hoof he is carefully examining, and Turner whirls about on his heel. Hollis, narrowly watching both, can readily see that it is another instance of Blake's ridicule, and he thinks it too bad that a man whom he is so disposed to like should seem to take every opportunity of shaming him.

"Don't mind Blake's nonsense, Hollis," says Truscott, kindly. "He is one of the best fellows in the regiment, but he can no more resist his propensity to burlesque everything than he could the desire to stand by you if anything went wrong. You'll get to know and like him after a while."

All the same, Captain Truscott means to have a word on the subject with his ranting friend, who is now once more exciting the merriment of the throng with his quips and jibes. It has always been one of the unwritten laws of the —th that new-comers among the

officers should be treated with every courtesy and consideration. It is only when old enough to fight their own battles that it has been considered admissible to ventilate their various foibles and weaknesses. Blake's open ridicule of Hollis, therefore, has struck discordantly upon the senses of the assembled party, and he cannot but see it. For the time being, therefore, he holds his shafts, and, linking his arm in that of his stanch friend and troop commander, Freeman, he presently strolls away to visit the bivouacs farther down the stream.

Just at sunset on the following day, and in a valley deeper, narrower, more romantic than that in which the command was camped at dawn, two long columns of horse have halted and are busily unsaddling and pitching their tents for the night. The column from the south is the big detachment of recruits led by Lieutenant Ray, and around him the officers of the regiment gather for hours, and many a rough-looking trooper, too, has hovered about until he could catch the lieutenant's eye, and then, encouraged by the kindly gleam of recognition, has come forward to salute the young soldier whose name is on every cavalryman's lips this night, and to be rewarded by a cordial shake of the hand. It is late in the cool, star-lit evening before most of the party seek their blankets, and Stannard and Jack Truscott, though they have been with Ray since the previous afternoon,—having ridden forth to meet him at the Gap,—are among the last to go. Blake's voice is heard declaiming a general good-night to the —th over among the tents, and his elocution just now is of that spasmodic and uncertain character which must be ex-

pected of a man who is compelled to dodge the boots and repel the insinuations hurled at him from every tent-door within range. It is true that the —th has had to eat some of its horses to keep alive, but the regiment is sensitive upon the subject, and Blake's effusion is conceded to be even worse in taste than the scanty breakfasts of September. But he rants on :

> " Good-night, I have to say good-night
> To such a host of howling swells.
> Good-night unto this famished band,
> All scrawny with——

" Confound you, Wayne ! Take your spurs off your boots before you sling them at me again.

> " Good-night to Freeman's beauteous bays,
> Good-night to chestnut sorrels dear,
> Good-night unto those luscious steaks
> And all the feeders nestled here.
> This jovial band detains me ? then
> I'll have to say good-night again."

Groans and objurgations come from every side ; but he persists :

" Sleep well, comrades mine ; may dreams of horse-flesh breed no nightmare. Wilkins, get thee to bed. If thou venturest forth in stocking feet again thou'lt catch thy death o' cold. Thou art more than half hoarse now. Thou'lt be a living chevaux-de-frise. Nay, it boots not what you sling," he laughs, as he stoops and picks up the nearest foot-gear and hurls it at the advancing Wilkins. " A thousand more mischances than this one have learned me how to brook

this patiently. List, list, oh, list!" he declaims, as he backs cautiously away:

> "Yet, there will come a time, my lads,
> When, if I read our stars aright,
> You will not care for tough cheval
> Or grass-fed mule; till then good-night.
> You wish that time were here? and I;
> You do not blush to own it's so?
> Why, you'd have rushed yourselves to death
> For such a feast a month ago."

But here a dash from half a dozen tents and a volley of boots and billingsgate drives the disturber of the peace from camp, and, pursued until out of range by missiles of every imaginable kind, he comes laughing and leaping in wildest spirits to the camp-fire where Truscott, Ray, and Stannard are still chatting, and throws himself panting upon his buffalo-robe.

"Upon my soul, Blake, you're more of a ranter every day of your life," says the major. "We'll have to put you in charge of the post theatre at Russell this winter."

"At Riley, you mean, major! Surely we go back to the Kansas stations?" cries Blake, sitting suddenly erect, his face covering instantly with a shade of strange anxiety. Ray looks up in surprise at the total and sudden change. Truscott lifts his eyes from the letter he has been reading in the fire-light and turns on Blake in manifest concern.

"Not a bit of it," is Stannard's prompt reply. "The general told me yesterday that head-quarters and six troops would take station at Russell the moment the campaign was over, yours among them."

For one moment Blake sits there as though stunned, then, suddenly recollecting himself, he starts to his feet.

"Where's my pipe?" he says, nervously; and, without another word, goes stalking off into the darkness down the valley. For a moment more the three friends sit looking at one another. It is Stannard who first finds voice.

"Well! what on earth is wrong with Blake?"

CAPTAIN BLAKE.

CHAPTER I.

It had been blowing hard all the morning, and now, at two o'clock, a fierce gale was sweeping down from the mountain-pass at the west, whirling the shingles out of the rickety old sheds and storehouses and quarters at the fort and sending them sailing and spinning over the bleak, barren prairie that spread away towards the distant roofs of the frontier city. Out among the foot-hills the cattle were huddling for shelter down in the deep ravines. The jack-rabbits, with their long ears flattened out on their furry backs, and even the sentries of the prairie-dog village had taken refuge in the bowels of the earth. The herds of troop horses, sent out after morning stables for a day of sunshine and fresh air, had long since been blown in under cover. The mules in the corral, down in the valley, had all turned tail to the northwest, and, with lowered fronts and every hair of their patchy hides stuck out the wrong way, stood braced against the gale in mute yet emphatic protest. Up at the guard-house the tall white flag-staff had been bending like a trout-rod until, in helpless surrender to the elements, the dot of a storm-flag had been hauled down; and the sentry

on number one, blinded and battered by the sand and gravel hurled into his face, had been drawn inside.

Over the broad expanse of the parade-ground, from the piazzas on officers' row to the big brown barracks of the men, not a living being was in sight. Even the colonel's orderly, who usually stood in statuesque pose at the gate or paced slowly up and down within hailing distance of the official front door, had been given a chair within the hall-way, and sat there dozing while the colonel took his own siesta. Over at the adjutant's office the clerks were busily writing, occasionally rising and shaking out the big muster-rolls or post returns on which they were at work, and slashing at their grimy desks with much muttered profanity, striving to rid them of the coat of sand and dust that came sifting in through rattling window-sash or the chinks and crooks and crannies and knot-holes in the warped weather-boarding. The orderly trumpeter, with his chair tilted back against the wall, was glancing every now and then up at the clock and then at the grim face of the sergeant-major. It was almost time for drill, and the colonel had not yet spoken. Unless the order came in five minutes he would have to sound the call, and then the whole garrison would upbraid him as though it were all his fault instead of that of the commanding officer. They could not possibly drill in such a gale: why, then, sound the call? Why the dickens could not the colonel make up his mind beforehand instead of waiting until the last moment? Why, indeed? Even the adjutant could not answer that question. It was one of the colonel's idiosyncrasies, was the sole explanation. He never would decide, said the growlers,

whether inspection was to be in full dress or fatigue, in overcoats or blouses, mounted or afoot, until ten minutes before the time for first call, and then, like as not, those men who had dressed in full uniform were compelled to unbuckle, uncord, unbutton, and slip out of those gaudy garments and into the simple blue, all the time freeing their impressions as to the colonel's heartless conduct. And those officers, mayhap, who had got into breeches, boots, and spurs, for mounted duty, would have to peel out of them in undignified haste and insert their nether limbs into their yellow-striped trousers, and barely escape a late when the assembly rang out over the fretful garrison. These were days when the seventh, the Sabbath of the Lord, was ushered in by a long and intricate ceremony, and these were, possibly, experiences that led to subsequent Congressional action forbidding the principal portion thereof. At all events, it was a well-established fact that when the colonel drove away townward to worship and glorify on his own account and to humble himself, in purely perfunctory style of course, before the throne of grace, he left behind him a battalion of miserable sinners for whom the peace and sanctity that should surround the day was irretrievably wrecked, and whose rank blasphemy over the colonel's vexatious indecision was something past praying for.

And there was some hard swearing going on down at the club-room, at the store, on this particularly breezy afternoon. There were most of the bachelors and one or two of the benedicts of the garrison assembled, and bets were even as to whether the colonel would have drill-call sounded or not. One and all had agreed

that, drill itself being an impossibility in such a blast, it was simply cruelty to make officers and men turn out under arms and answer roll-call, and one and all were disposed to lay the blame, on this day of all others, on the shoulders of Lieutenant Hollis.

"It's all your doing, you wooden-headed gabbler," shouted the tallest and lankiest of the party, lowering a pair of lean, long legs from the window-sill to the floor. "How many times have we not told you never to go and suggest a thing to the chief if you wanted to have it done? Odds boddikins! man, can you never learn wisdom with examples such as these?" And Lieutenant Blake buried his long moustache in a glass of beer and rose to his full height, winking Weller-like over the edge of the can at his circle of associates.

"Oh, come now, Blake," answered Hollis, unwilling to be the victim of popular obloquy, "I didn't convey any idea to him whatever; I simply——"

"Well said, mine ancient. Stop right there, now, till we make a note of the first indication of awakening intellect you've shown in a week. Of course you didn't convey an idea to him. It wouldn't have been you if you had. You simply, very simply, said—what?"

"Well, that I supposed if it blew hard there would be no drill, and I could go to town. I thought I could gallop in right after that Board met, don't you know?"

"To which our revered leader responded in so many words that if it continued to blow a gale at two thirty there possibly wouldn't, and that time alone would

tell. Precisely what you ought to have had sense enough to know in the first place. Hollis, you've had enough good advice from me to make most young men paragons of wisdom and discretion. Thou'rt a parlous boy! And—— Zounds! there goes drill-call now—Perdition take the thing!"

"For goodness' sake, Blake, shut up, or we'll never hear recall," shouted Mr. Hunter, as he made a lunge for his belt and sabre. "Great Scott! Just look at that trumpeter! He's well-nigh flattened out against the band-stand. There, listen!"

Two or three young officers had started for the door, but were promptly adjured not to open it unless they wanted the club-room blown inside out. For an instant the gale seemed to howl and shriek with wrath at its brazen rival, and the boy bugler threw an arm around a post of the stand and braced himself for another blast. This time he was greeted with a suppressed cheer. It was "recall" that came "whistling down the wind,"—the soldier signal that the troops need not turn out.

"Now, why couldn't he just as well have said so three or four hours ago instead of keeping us in suspense? I might have been at the Terrys' for luncheon. Can't you let me off stables, captain?" asked Hollis, with a grin on his good-natured face.

"You don't mean you are going in town a day like this?" said Captain Gregg, in amaze.

"Why not? There are those young ladies from Detroit at Major Thorp's. I haven't called yet, and they came three days ago."

"Great Cæsar's ghost, Hollis! No woman on earth

would expect a call this afternoon, and no woman wants a caller when she doesn't expect him," quoth his captain. Other officers, too, were prompt to ridicule the plan; but Blake, usually the most declamatory of men, after one quick glance at Hollis, turned suddenly away.

"Come, Dana, let's have a game of pool," he called aloud, and busied himself in selecting a cue. Three or four of the young fellows quickly joined him, rejoicing in their unexpected holiday. Captain Gregg himself slowly found his feet, saying a little exercise was what he needed, and pool would supply it. There had fallen an odd sort of constraint on the party.

"How are you going in, Hollis?" was presently asked. "You won't be fit to be seen by the time you get there."

"Oh, I'll ride. I can get brushed off and put in shape at the hotel. Here's Jim, now," he added; for at the moment a big gray horse, lunging and switching about, wrathful at being led forth in such weather, came cantering under the lee of the store, and a young trooper sprang from the saddle and rubbed his eyes with grimy fist.

"You'll never get back this night, Hollis, and, in my opinion, have no business to go," said Gregg, gloomily. "Of course, I do not oppose since the colonel has given permission, but he gave it before the gale began, and doubtless thinks you have abandoned the idea by this time."

"Oh, I'll get back somehow," was the laughing response. "If I don't, it won't be Jim's fault. He has faced many a gale as stiff as this before you

ever came here. Good-by, fellows; be good to yourselves."

"By-by, Hollis," was the careless, half-laughing reply of one or two of the group now gathering about the table. Gregg simply looked after him, half perplexed. Blake turned his back and bored savagely at the cube of chalk with the cue tip.

There was a wild whistle of wind the instant the door was opened, a slam, and Hollis was gone.

For a few moments no one spoke. No man in that party could have been surprised at any expedition Hollis might make where the society of the opposite sex was the object in view. He had been only a short time in the —th, transferred thither from another corps after a campaign that had brought about some vacancies on the muster-roll. He had been stationed in the fort over a year, and, being a most determined society man, was thoroughly acquainted with all the desirable people in the neighborhood when his new comrades arrived at the post comparative strangers. He was brimful of life, energy, and animal spirits; a fair rider, a jolly, good-natured companion, a most accomplished dancer, and leader in all social entertainments; but life to him seemed vested with no higher objects than those involved in "germans," parties, and private theatricals. Military duty was a necessary evil, grudgingly performed and more frequently slighted that social duties might have his utmost time. He was the despair of the regimental adjutant, who found errors in every kind of paper Hollis was compelled to submit; the toleration of his good-natured captain, because Mrs. Gregg would not allow a word to be said against her second

lieutenant, and the exasperation of his colonel, who, on more than one occasion, had sent couriers racing townward after him, with orders to come back at once, and, amazed but indomitably smiling, he would return, to catch a rasping for some carelessly-executed piece of work, and yet was so apologetic and regretful that the colonel himself would feel disarmed, and the adjutant would turn to and straighten out the papers for him. Everybody liked Hollis, in town and at the fort. The ladies of the —th were enraptured with him when they arrived, for he was among the first to call and bid them welcome. He was always proposing hops, dances, picnics,—something delightful for their entertainment,—and as most of the ladies of the regiment were young and attractive, some of them radiant beauties, and all of them fond, more or less, of attention and the many bright phases of garrison life, Mr. Hollis was a recruit worth having. Several of the ladies, too, had decided to send for unmarried sisters or relatives, and give them an idea of army life on the far frontier, and the —th was rather short of bachelors. Two of their array had been seriously wounded during the summer campaign, and were off the dancing-list for the time being. Another, one of the best partners in the days gone by, had fallen deeply in love with a girl who had just returned to the East, and was reported engaged to her after a brief but romantic courtship that everybody in the regiment was eagerly talking of except those best informed in the matter. And so, with Dana and Hunter off the dancing-list, and Ray in love and, as they said, "reformed," the —th indeed needed young blood, declared the ladies. True,

there were four or five admirable fellows among the subalterns,—Clark, the new quartermaster, Royce, Webster, and even "Daddy-long-legs," as some of them disdainfully called Blake, were all good dancers and excellent partners. "Still, they are not quite so enthusiastic, you know," said Mrs. Turner. "Poor Mr. Blake is so *blasé* and superior, and Mr. Clark is so dreadfully impartial." And Mrs. Turner was an authority on social questions with the —th, and had been so for years, only this much of the statement she did not relish hearing. Many of the married officers were good dancers, too; "Still, that wasn't quite—at least it didn't seem—the same as having plenty of bachelors," exclaimed another regimental belle. Altogether, between the extensive acquaintance he had among the local dames and damsels and his undoubted popularity, Mr. Hollis was certainly in metaphorical clover at the outset of the bitter winter that settled down on the Rockies that ever memorable year.

"And yet," said Mr. Blake, only a few days before, "if there's a possible chance for Tommy Hollis to put his foot in it, you can bet your last cent he'll do it."

It must be confessed that there was not a little to inspire Mr. Blake in this gloomy prophecy. Tommy was the hero of half a dozen exploits, both exasperating and absurd, over which his new comrades of the —th had alternately laughed and sworn until almost any other man would have been moved to more discretion. But Hollis seemed indomitably bent on fulfilling Blake's prediction. It was he who induced the ladies of his former regiment to give a complimentary

hop to the officers of the —th as they camped for a few days on the open prairie *en route* to the Indian country; charged himself with the duty of delivering the invitations; reported that his mission was fulfilled, and then expressed boundless amaze when the hop came off and not a man of the —th appeared. The ladies of the garrison did not cease talking of that unparalleled piece of rudeness for months after. Then at last, when the matter was brought to the attention of that much-maligned regiment, it transpired that Tommy had indeed ridden over to camp and told the adjutant and one or two of the officers that there was to be a little dance at the fort that night, and invited them to be present; was informed that not a man could come, as they had nothing but scouting rig to wear, to which he promptly replied that that made no difference whatever, as it was purely an informal affair, and rode away very possibly believing that, despite their regrets, the —th would attend. Not one word was said of its being a party given in their honor by the ladies of the fort, and the —th could have mobbed him when the truth came out.

Then it was Hollis who rode far and wide through town the day after the regiment returned from the campaign, ragged, bearded, unkempt, and invited scores of his friends to come out to the fort to meet them all at a hop on the following night. That there could be any hesitancy on the part of the —th never occurred to him for one instant, and he was amazed at the reception accorded him when he appeared at the camp and smilingly announced that all the nice people in town would be with them the next evening.

"Man alive! didn't you know that not a soul of us has any clothes here except the rags on his back?" was the first remark that greeted him. He had totally forgotten that the regiment came to the department equipped for field service only, and that all personal baggage was miles and miles away. So poor Tommy galloped around town again, recalling his invitations all the next day, and yet learned nothing by experience. Two weeks later he induced a number of the bachelors to "chip in" and give a dinner to a distinguished officer going East on leave, and, as he thoroughly knew the town, undertook all arrangements, which were complete as far as the banquet was concerned, and everybody thought Hollis had done capitally until they assembled *en grande tenue* to do honor to their guest,—who had departed on the afternoon train for the East that very day, totally ignorant of the feast that had been in store for him. The chaffing Hollis had to undergo for this performance would have made a sensitive man simply rabid. But the ladies of the —th were beginning to arrive and take possession of their new abiding-places out at the fort, and he found consolation in the joy with which they welcomed his enthusiastic aid in fitting up parlors, hanging curtains and pictures, and making himself successively useful to more than half their number. "Did you ever know a nicer fellow?" "Isn't he just too kind and helpful for anything?" "What a delightful acquisition!" These and similar feminine explosives were dinned in the ears of the other men until Hollis was rechristened "Helpful Tommy," and solemnly proclaimed an enemy to the peace and good order of the

bachelor mess. But he could afford it all, for the women were entirely his friends.

And then Mrs. Granger returned from a summer at the sea-shore, and the tide began to turn.

She was a stranger to the ladies of the —th, but not to the old fort and its neighborhood. She was the wife of an officer of the supply department, a dazzlingly handsome woman, who for two years had queened it in the garrison despite the fact that she did not live there at all. Her home was at the quartermaster's depot, over by the railway, and much nearer town, but no party, no dinner, no theatricals, no social affair of any kind was a success in the garrison unless graced by her presence. In years she was much younger than her husband. Major Granger was a man engrossed in his duties and in the art of making money. He had property interests all over the West, and they absorbed his whole time and attention. He had one fondness,—whist, which his wife despised. She had several fondnesses,—and he was none of them. He enjoyed an evening at the fort because it gave him several hours with the older officers and his beloved rubber. She rejoiced in her evenings there, as they gave her hours with the younger officers and the delightful dance. He was growing bald and portly. She had lost not a hair of her queenly head, nor gained an ounce in weight. People from town coming to call on the ladies of the new regiment invariably asked if they had ever met Mrs. Granger; and the ladies were not slow to note that of all their sex who had been prominent in local society during the few years previous, no one had made so deep an impression

as the wife of this solemn, spectacled major who so punctiliously called to pay his respects on their arrival and to assure them how glad Mrs. Granger would be to meet them on her return. Naturally, in comparing notes, the new arrivals had come to the conclusion that Mrs. Granger had been the avowed leader in all social affairs for some time past, and the question that promptly occurred to Mrs. Turner and her cronies was whether she would expect to resume her queendom now that the —th had come; and the ladies of the —th had good reason to feel that, in view of their many triumphs in the past, Mrs. Granger might find the throne and sceptre less attainable than before.

By the time they had been settled three weeks every woman in the —th was very curious to see Mrs. Granger. Many of them had begun to question Mr. Hollis about her. Some of them had already begun to decide that his enthusiastic praise of that lady was sufficient to depose him from his high station in their regard. And then she came, and called, and conquered. Her grace of manner, her frank cordiality, her unaffected pleasure in meeting the ladies of the —th, of whom she had heard so very, very much that was pleasant; her semi-confidential, yet most guarded, information that their predecessors at the fort had been, oh, everything that was nice and good, but still—don't you know?—there was something lacking,—that indefinable something that only birth, education, and social position can give; "and it is so different where the —th is concerned." Now, as most of the matrons of the regiment had been prominent in social circles in Eastern or Southern cities; as many of them

had been educated in the finest finishing schools of New York and Philadelphia, or else abroad, and as they had reason to pride themselves on their antecedents, Mrs. Granger's prompt discovery and equally prompt recognition of these claims to pre-eminence fell soothingly upon their ears. A woman who wore such lovely toilets, who was wealthy, and who knew "what was what," as Mrs. Turner deftly expressed it, could not fail to be a welcome addition to their set. Mrs. Turner, indeed, was quite put out because Mrs. Stannard and Mrs. Truscott did not at once chime in with her views. The former, well versed in such matters and in the study of man and womankind, had received Mrs. Granger's advances with all courtesy, yet reserved her opinion for the ears of her lord,—the gruff, but beloved major of the regiment. Mrs. Truscott, wrapped up in her stalwart husband and her joy of a baby, was not disposed to like any woman who sought the attentions of the other sex, and everybody had heard of Mrs. Granger's being the recipient of much homage from all the officers stationed there during the previous year, all of whom now were gone but Mr. Hollis.

One odd thing had happened the day she drove out to the fort in her stylish landau, wrapped in robes and seal-skins, for the air of early December was sharply cold, though the snow lay only in patches on the prairie. Captain Truscott, Lieutenants Ray, Blake, and the adjutant had all been with Major Stannard in his den, and busy with the map of the late campaign, while Mrs. Stannard was entertaining visitors in the parlor. Stable-call sounded It was time for them to go.

Blake had been in the wildest spirits, chatting, laughing, and spouting Shakespeare, as was his wont when in jolly mood. The major led his friends through the dining-room to the parlor just as the servant ushered in two ladies. Presentations were necessary. Mrs. Granger beamed with cordiality upon the major and Captain Truscott, and then the long lashes swept her downy cheek as she extended a daintily-gloved hand to Mr. Blake.

"It is so pleasant to meet old friends again," she said, then raised her lovely gray eyes and looked straight into his; and Blake, with white face and twitching lips, had merely bowed low, said some inarticulate words, and left the room.

"Have you known Mr. Blake long?" was the not unnatural question.

"Oh, we were great friends once upon a time,—long ago."

And was this, then, the explanation of Blake's long bachelorhood? Was it for her sake he still wore the willow? Not a man nor a woman in the regiment up to this moment dreamed that he had ever even met Mrs. Granger before. But Mrs. Raymond was present at this meeting, and Mrs. Raymond was a woman who never kept an idea to herself. Sooner or later everybody had heard of the sudden change in Blake's manner on meeting Mrs. Granger. Some of the youngsters had been talking of it at the store this very afternoon before he and Hollis had happened in. And now, as the gale and the game continued, here he was again, silent and absent-minded. It was Blake's turn to play.

"Come, Legs," called Dana, "what are you mooning there by the window for?" And Blake started, shook himself together, aimed for a simple shot, and missed.

Tramping down to stables that afternoon, Gregg took the tall lieutenant's arm as they wrapped their heavy coats about them and struggled along in the lee of the storehouses.

"Blake, didn't Granger go up to Sherman yesterday as witness on that court, or at least this morning?"

"How should I know?" was the curt answer.

"Yet you know it is there and not to town that Hollis has gone. I know it without looking."

CHAPTER II.

THE lamps were lighted in the club-room and store by the time the men came marching back from stables, fairly rowing one another up in the teeth of the gale. It was sharply cold, and every now and then angry spits of snow would strike upon the cheek, hard and stinging as small shot. The colonel had noted the absence of Mr. Hollis, as Captain Gregg fully desired he should do. He wanted his subaltern brought up with a round turn, but, like other weak men in or out of the army, preferred that some one else should do the disagreeable part of the work for him. He was actually disappointed when the colonel coolly said,—

"Yes, I did give him permission to go to town, and it is my fault. We could hardly expect him to get back in the face of such a storm."

Gregg said no more, but kept up a good deal of thinking. If Blake would only take the matter up now;—but Blake wouldn't; Blake shook him off the moment he attempted to speak of it, and even angrily turned his back on him. Gregg was much perplexed. It may have been all very well for a bachelor officer to be devoting himself to the handsome wife of an absent comrade a year ago, before the —th came to the garrison, but "this was something," said Gregg, "the —th wouldn't stand." The fact that it had had to stand it

on one or two occasions in the past was exactly what made the colonel dead set against it now. There should be no scandal in the regiment he commanded, said the chief, and Gregg really thought he ought to know that it was garrison chat that all last year Mr. Hollis had been an adorer of Mrs. Granger's, and that now he was beginning again the moment of her return, and this day, when her husband was away. Still he hated to be the means of starting a story of any kind. He wished the colonel could see without being told. He wondered the colonel had not been told, since the ladies very generally heard or saw all that was going on. Then it suddenly flashed upon him that Mrs. Granger had been most attentive to her ladyship, the colonel's wife, driving her about in the stylish landau, sending her flowers from her little conservatory, giving her a luncheon at the depot just to meet some of the nicest people in town; and for the week or ten days that followed her home-coming, Mrs. Granger this and Mrs. Granger that was the glowing theme of Mrs. Atherton's discourse. Mrs. Granger had entertained her delightfully; was a most charming, superior, educated woman. How she wished she could transfer into Ours. A few such women would do more to form it than anything else. And this sort of talk made some of the regimental ladies wince. They did not at all like it that their social head should consider them in need of forming, and Mrs. Gregg and Mrs. Turner were decidedly indignant, while Mrs. Wilkins—an indomitable matron, always at war with every colonel's wife—declared it was "simply abominable" on her ladyship's part. She would have Mrs. Atherton know that "the

ladies of the —th were not to be led by the likes of—well, by ladies like Mrs. Granger, with all her landaus and luncheons." Indeed, there were frequent symptoms of insubordination, all on account of the growing tendency to quote Mrs. Granger on every occasion, when the change came that made them once again a united sisterhood.

After buffeting their way half-way back to quarters on such a bitter evening and in face of such a blast, what was more natural than that the officers—a number at least—should drop in at the cheerily-lighted club-room and take a rest, or its equivalent. The colonel, with old Stannard and three or four seniors, pushed on up the walk, bending nearly double to oppose the gale; but Gregg wanted a word with Blake, who had plainly avoided him, and whose long legs had borne him well ahead of the whole array the moment the stable duty was over. Four or five young infantrymen were sprawled about the room as their comrades of the cavalry came blustering in, whipping off fur gloves and caps, and thrashing about with their arms in their attempt to restore circulation at their fingers' ends. These looked up and hailed the first comer with eager delight, for no man in the —th was much more popular than "Leggy Blake." Ordinarily the most jovial and companionable soul, the tall lieutenant seemed wrapped in gloom, and only nodded in response to their laughing hails as he crossed the room and stood at the little bar.

"By Jove! we're defrauded, fellows," gleefully shouted Mr. Ross, of the Riflers. "He's heard the news: look at his face."

"What news?" was the sharp response, as Blake turned promptly upon them. "What do you mean?"

For a moment none could speak. The opening of the outer door was accompanied by another shriek and rush of the gale that set the newspapers whirling off the centre-table and rattling about the sanded floor. Half a dozen of the cavalry crowd had entered by this time, and all heard the sudden snap in Blake's tone.

"Well-l," said Ross, slowly, "I'll have to answer you Yankee fashion. Who do you suppose is elected to lead the ladies' german?"

"Oh, Ray, or Clark, or almost anybody," said Blake, indifferently, and turned back to the bar, levelling a significant finger at a big decanter.

"Metheglin, thou menial, and prithee haste—— Have a nip, Dana? 'Tis a nipping and an eager air without."

"Who do *you* say, Dana, or *you*, Hunter?" persisted Ross, with mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Can't guess, if it isn't Ray or Clark or 'Legs' here. Who?" And the young gentlemen looked oddly interested.

"Tommy Hollis, begad! late of the Fortieth Foot. What have you fellows been doing that your ladies should give you all the go-by and pick out a raw recruit,—an ex-doughboy at that?"

Blake turned slowly about in the very act of pouring out a moderate tipple, looking at Ross as though hardly credulous. Dana glanced quickly at his tall associate, and contented himself with a low whistle. Hunter turned away, and intimated that he, too,

wouldn't mind joining Blake if properly approached. The others burst out laughing.

For several days the ladies of the —th had been deep in preparation for a hop that was to eclipse anything yet given at the fort. There had been two or three very enjoyable little parties: one tendered by the infantry to the new arrivals; another by the garrison bachelors to the ladies of both regiments and those in town; a third by the officers of the —th. But now the ladies of that redoubtable corps proposed having the finest of all,—a german that would open the eyes of the entire neighborhood; that would be charmingly managed; that was to outshine all previous affairs in the beauty of the decorations, the prodigality of the supper, and the elegance of the favors. A general court-martial for the settlement of a difference between two officers of very high rank, being in session in town, there were gathered in the neighborhood a large number of the field and staff. There was every reason why the "ladies' german"—as it began to be spoken of—should attain proportions never yet attempted at the fort, for its splendor would be heralded far and wide throughout the whole military division, as, either on the detail of the court or the witnesses summoned before it, nearly all the larger posts were represented. When originally conceived a much less ambitious programme had been decided upon; but in some way or other every day added to the items, and not a few of the benedicts began to pull on long faces as their better halves detailed with voluble tongue the results of the latest conference. It was too late to retreat, however; they were in for it and had to see it through.

That the meetings held by the fair projectors of the scheme were entirely harmonious, and that the views of the various dames and damsels called into congress were all of accord, no one could truthfully assert. Mr. Billings, the adjutant, could not help noting the flushed faces, the compressed lips, and the high-tossing heads of some of the members thereof as they came forth from their consultation, and had only a very distant and absent-minded nod for him as he hastened by on his way to the office. Despite resolutions of secrecy and a determination to surround the proceedings with a degree of mystery almost equal to that which hedgeth those of the court, there were occasional verbal outcroppings,—those spats of straw which told the way the wind was blowing,—over which unfeeling husbands later on chuckled not a little when comparing notes. But one thing was certain: the ladies meant to manage this affair themselves; conduct all its business; superintend the floor-waxing, the decorations, the music, the preparations for supper, the sideboard, punch-bowl, the invitations, the favors, even the arrangements for caring for the teams and drivers from town. It was to be the "ladies' german" in all that the name implied, and no woman not of the —th, and no man whatsoever, was to be called into consultation. "We just mean to run it ourselves, and stand or fall on the result," said the spirited matron at the head of the committee of ways and means, "and you men can chuckle as much as you like." It was true that in deciding upon the eligibility for invitation of certain of the towns-people, the young matrons having that matter in charge found themselves compelled to con-

sult the sisterhood of the Riflers, and received the varying opinions that were to be expected. It was even rumored that they had gone so far as to ask Mr. Hollis, in strict confidence, for his views upon the McGuffys and the O'Gradys, and, receiving his cordial endorsement, these very worthy but somewhat untutored families were duly included in the list, whereat the ladies in some households in town elevated their eyebrows and gave utterance to expressions not altogether complimentary to the discrimination of the —th. It is even possible that, had there been a little more time, civil war would have broken out in garrison, for it was known that a strong minority had dissented radically from the views of the leaders. But better counsels kept open rupture in check, and, so far as the outer world was concerned, all seemed going "merry as a marriage bell," until the discovery was made that in one thing, at least, they must call for the services of a man. Whoever heard of a german without a leader?

The grand affair was to come off on Thursday night. Everything had been settled except the name of their leader. The meeting held on Saturday afternoon at the colonel's quarters was momentous and not entirely devoid of spirited controversy. Some of the ladies did not attend it at all, alleging good and sufficient reasons, for the possession of which they were not unthankful. The selection of a leader had been finally left in the hands of a committee composed of three ladies who had been most prominent in the movement, and it was known that they had had a conference on Sunday evening, when, as we all concede, other matters

supposedly had engrossed their thoughts. That the result of their deliberation was not one which they themselves desired to announce to the regiment may be derived from the fact that it was through the Riflers, and with much chaff and fun and laughter, that the bachelors of the —th received the information that they had been "overslaughed," and the honor conferred upon a new-comer to their ranks, and of all men on earth Tommy Hollis.

Of course it would never do to show the least feeling in the matter. Clark and Webster, Dana and Hunter accepted the verdict with much apparent equanimity, though frankly admitting it a surprise. Hunter, it is true, was on the ragged edge of a rash speech when Blake's boot-heel came down on his foot, and, glancing up in sudden wrath and pain, Mr. Hunter glared at his long-legged friend, and was silenced at sight of the face glowering at him from behind the outspread newspaper.

"What the devil's got into Blake, anyhow?" he asked his comrades a few moments after, as they seated themselves at the dinner-table in Clark's roomy quarters. "He's been savage and sullen as a wolf for the last three days. I never knew a fellow so changed."

"Blake's hipped about something, I reckon. He wouldn't come to dinner; said he was going to dine out," answered Dana, shortly. "That makes two gone to-night. Now, of course, it wouldn't do to say so there, with Ross and Graham and Foster, of the Riflers, chaffing away at us; but I do think it is a mighty queer thing that Hollis should have

been chosen to lead that german. Does he know it yet?"

"I think it was because he knew it that he was in such a hurry to get off to-day in all this gale," answered Mr. Clark, dryly.

"You don't mean——? Why, man, he couldn't!" answered Dana, vaguely yet suggestively, dropping the soup-ladle with which he had been busying himself. "Why, Clark, he's *got* to ask Mrs. Atherton or Mrs. Turner, or some one of the committee to lead with him,—he's simply got to."

"Well, you ask Blake what he thinks," was the cool reply. And the entry of the servant put an end to the subject.

But Blake was not coming, as he had said. The bugles had summoned the garrison to retreat roll-call, and then the officers had scattered to quarters, leaving Blake still pretending to read his paper at the club-room. Muldoon, the attendant, was going about lowering the window-shades, and occasionally muttering some half-whimsical comment on the storm. He had closed the heavy wooden shutters on the west side of the big barn-like structure and lighted a lamp or two before the sun was fairly down. Now he stopped to touch a match to another that hung nearly over Blake's head, and caught a glimpse of the knitted brows and hollowed cheek behind the paper.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Blake, but don't you want the late paper,—that's a week old. You ain't feeling just right, I'm afraid, sir. I ain't seen you looking so bad since Mr. Ray had all his trouble last summer." And

Muldoon's face was full of genuine concern, for, among all the officers, Blake was his pet.

"'Tis grief that's beauty's canker, honest Michael. I've let concealment, like a bug in a rug, prey on this damask cheek until it's furrowed like a washboard." And, with an attempt at his old airy manner, Blake hurled aside his paper and rose to his feet. "Nothing's the matter with me, Mike, but a bad taste in my mouth. It's a wry face you see I'm making, because you gave me bourbon. Halloo! what's that?" There was instant change in face and attitude. A horse's crunching, plunging hoofs sounded suddenly without. A light, as of hope though half incredulous, shone in his eyes, then faded suddenly away. The east door was forced slowly open, then closed with wrathful bang and a strange figure stood shivering just within.

In clinging riding-habit of coarse army cloth; in a jockey-cap of the same material, with the ear-tabs down and tied beneath the chin; with a rough fur cape about her shoulders, and long gauntlets of beaver, five sizes too big for her; with a mass of auburn hair tumbling down about her back; with great big brown eyes, under brows thick and arching; with a face filled with anxiety and battered by the tempest, there stood a tall slip of a girl perhaps fifteen years of age. Blake looked at her in astonishment.

"Good Lord, Nan! How did you get here?" was Muldoon's startled question.

"Rode. Where's father?" was the brief response.

"Ain't he home? He hasn't been near here to-day."

"Don't lie. He drank up what you gave him yes-



"'Good Lord, Nan! How did you get here?' was Muldoon's startled question."

Page 32.

terday, and he started out first thing this morning for more, and I know it."

"Indeed, Nan, he hasn't been here at all. I'll leave it to Mr. Blake here. This is old Captain Bryan's girl, lieutenant. She takes mighty good care of the old man, too."

"If it wasn't for you and this," and her great eyes flashed as she looked wrathfully about, "there would be no need. You get him drunk, Muldoon; now, where have you hidden him? He's needed home."

"Nan, if he isn't home, indeed he must have gone to town. I give you my word I ain't seen him at all. Ask Mr. Blake here."

"Are you Captain Bryan's daughter?" queried Blake, with a kind interest in his eyes, as he stepped forward, removing his cap as he did so. "Indeed, I knew your father very well, and I assure you he hasn't been here; but I'll help you find him right off."

The half-defiant look upon the girl's face, the anxiety and anger there commingled, slowly gave place to a totally different expression. A flood of crimson swept to her very forehead, as his first words reached her. There was an instant look of wonderment in the big eyes at his tone, soft and courteous as though he spoke to a lady, not to a wild prairie waif like her; then, too, he raised his forage-cap, with its glistening gold sabres, just as he would to the gorgeously-dressed beauties whom she had sometimes watched and envied from afar. She had come prepared for battle; come determined to drag her old father forth before greater harm could be done, and to hurl reproaches at his

tempters; and here at the very outset was disarmed by this gentle knight, long-legged, gaunt, and quixotic, maybe, but almost the first officer she had spoken to for a year,—the only one who had ever spoken to her except in tones of pity or indifference. She had almost hated and despised the whole array of them, as she often said. She had fled and hidden herself whenever their gay hunting-parties stopped at the ranch, five miles away up the creek, where her close-fisted old father welcomed them always as customers. She had not set foot within the fort for many a long month, and would not now but for bitter anxiety. And now, what meant this total change in her reception?

Utterly careless of her looks as she had forced her entrance upon the scene, the child's face burned with sudden consciousness of her torn and dishevelled attire, her unkempt hair, the dust and dirt that streaked her face and reddened her eyelids. One swift glance she shot up at the tall stranger, then turned suddenly away, burying her face in her arms.

"Oh, father, father," she moaned. "Then he's lost. He's been drinking,—you *know* he's been drinking. He's wandered off as he did before, and he'll freeze to death to-night. Oh, father, father."

"Hush, Nan; hush, child," said Blake, striving to draw her to a seat. "Here, Muldoon, bring this little woman a glass of good sherry. Why the child's half frozen. Now, look at me, Nan; we'll find father. Just tell me when he left home; how he was dressed; which way he rode, and I'll take six or eight of our men with overcoats and blankets, and we'll get him home, never you fear, gale or no gale. There, come,

come, don't cry so, Nan. Drink this, child. Nay, you must. See if any of the men are in the other room there, Muldoon, and send for my first sergeant at once. I'll go up and see Captain Freeman myself."

And so, half-soothing, half-reasoning with her, he strove to chase away the deep trouble in which the child was plunged. She ceased her tears and sipped at the wine he held to her lips, and looked shyly up into his kindly face, through those long wet lashes.

"It's getting so dark and cold," she said, and the piteous quivering of her lips began again. "I'm so afraid you can't find him."

"We won't come back until we do, Nan; but meantime we must look after you. This is no place for you, my child, and I'm going to take you right up the road to Mrs. Freeman; she will take the best kind of care of you."

"Oh, I can't go," protested the girl, with shuddering glance at her soiled and grimy attire. "Do let me stay here until you are ready to start." And she shrank in such genuine distress that Blake knew not what to do.

"Just look after her a few minutes, Muldoon," he cried. "I'll run up to Captain Freeman's. I don't know how to talk to the child," he muttered to himself, as he plunged out into the storm, "but Mrs. Freeman will,—bless the woman's heart!" And four minutes later, half-breathless, he was in his captain's brightly-lighted parlor, hurriedly telling his story. The children looked up eagerly from the hearth-rug where they were playing. The captain laid aside his

beloved paper, and Mrs. Freeman's sweet face, all sympathy and interest, gazed up into his.

"Bring her right here to me," she cried. "Of course we'll be glad to have her. You go and help him, captain. I'll go too if you'll let me."

"No, you stay home. This wind would whirl such a giddy thing off her pins in a second," laughed her tall husband, as he rose to his feet and strode out into the hall. "We'll get her here all right. How many men do you want, Blake?" he queried. "It's an awful night for men and horses, but there's no getting out of it. Send Corporal Wales into town to Luke's place the first thing, and have him wire back from there. I'll go and see the colonel, and have the operator in the office. Let another man ride over to the depot at the same time."

Just about an hour later, while the gale was at its height, there came a fumbling ring at the front door-bell of Major Granger's substantial quarters at the big supply-depot. The parlor windows gave forth a bright glare; a coal-fire roared in the open grate; the maid-servant, who went to answer the bell, remembered that Mrs. Granger looked up inquiringly from the table where she was seated, and said,—

"It is not possible any one could be calling on such a night. Say that the major will be home to-morrow, if any of the men want to see him."

An instant later the door flew open; a gust of wind blew out the hall-lamp; there was a shriek of terror from the girl; a heavy, lunging fall. The maid-servant scurried back to the kitchen, from which she had come. Mrs. Granger sprang from her seat,

startled and alarmed ; her companion made one leap to the hall-way, bent down, and dragged into the light the head and shoulders of a prostrate soldier. Then, with consternation in his tones, he exclaimed,—

"My God ! it's Blake."

In an instant there was another fall —Mrs. Granger had fainted.

CHAPTER III.

THE gale had died away during the night, and the day that followed was bright and radiant. The blast from the Rockies had subsided, but there was a tempest at the fort.

It must have been about eleven o'clock. Half a dozen ladies were busily at work in Mrs. Truscott's cosey parlor. German favors of the daintiest make were being rapidly inspected and pronounced upon by the fair committee appointed for the purpose. The captain and Mr. Ray had appeared an instant at the parlor-door, but were bidden summarily to vanish. Mrs. Raymond was sure that if they saw those favors, the whole garrison would know all about them in less than no time. So the two officers laughingly passed on into the captain's own particular den, where they were presently engaged in earnest talk. Excusing herself a moment, Mrs. Truscott, who really could not et her husband come in or go out without a kiss, slipped quietly through the sitting-room beyond and tapped lightly at the study-door, bent over the captain's handsome head and pressed her lips upon his brow, then turned to the lieutenant.

"How is Mr. Blake now?" she asked, in low tone.

"Resting quietly," answered Ray; "there's no great harm done. For the present, at least, we want it

understood that his horse stumbled, and so stunned him; but—— Jack has told you?"

"Yes. And is there no trace of his assailant?"

"Not a vestige. It's the most mysterious thing. Hollis declares that there wasn't a sound of a scuffle; but in that gale he couldn't have heard. He and Mrs. Granger were playing cribbage, it seems. Blake himself remembers nothing but that, having thrown the reins over the gate-post, he was just going up the steps when the blow came. Grimes says it was a knotted club that did it, and a club was found not ten yards away. It is a wonder his skull wasn't fractured; the thick fur cap saved him. I'm going again as soon as I see Jack a moment. I've a letter to write before the stage leaves."

"Tell her I miss her almost as much as you do," answered Mrs. Truscott, with a sympathetic light in her lovely eyes. "Now I'll leave you together. There's Mrs. Turner just come in." And twining her arms about her husband's neck for a final hug, as he sat in his easy-chair, the blithe young matron departed.

It was, indeed, Mrs. Turner, and Mrs. Turner in a state of excitement bordering on the explosive. She had not time for the ordinary social greeting. Her eyes were ablaze, her cheeks flushed, her every movement spasmodic. Fiercely she broke forth,—

"Have you heard the news? *Have* you heard the news?"

"About Mr. Blake, dear?" queried Mrs. Raymond, indifferently. "Why, of course, hours ago."

"Mr. Blake, indeed! Have you heard the news—

the news—the——? Well, I've no word to express it. Have you heard——? But just let me ask you one thing. Who should Mr. Hollis have asked to lead our german with him? Now, answer me that."

"Why, Mrs. Atherton, or Mrs. Turner, or Mrs. Truscott, or, indeed, I don't know," answered Mrs. Stannard, smilingly, amused at the impetuosity of her near neighbor. "Why do you ask?" she suddenly inquired, seeing the looks of eager curiosity on the faces of the little circle.

"Well, of all women hereabouts, who *shouldn't* he have asked? Answer me that," exclaimed Mrs. Turner, rising dramatically to her full height and stretching forth her slender arm. There was an instant of effective tableau. Down dropped the pretty knick-knacks of favors; down dropped busy fingers, reckless of needle-pricks; half a dozen pairs of wide-open eyes—blue, hazel, gray, and brown—gazed in wild, half-incredulous suspense into the quivering face of their lively comrade; and it was Mrs. Freeman who first found voice; but instant chorus followed.

"Mrs. *Turner!*"

"*Mrs.* Turner! You can't mean it!"

"Mrs. Turner! It simply isn't possible!"

"Well, of all th——!"

"I declare I shall die!"

And then every woman in the group threw herself back in her chair and laughed until the tears started; laughed until the captain strode forth from his den, with whimsical query as to the cause of all this hysterical merriment. Not a name had been mentioned, yet just who it must be seemed to have flashed upon

every one of those acute feminine minds at one and the same instant. The little army cottage fairly rang with their peal of hilarity.

"You saw him last night, Mr. Ray," at last exclaimed Mrs. Turner, as that mystified officer came peering after Truscott. "You saw him last night and talked with him an hour. Why didn't you tell us first thing this morning?"

"Tell you what?" queried Mr. Ray, his white teeth gleaming, as he looked in mingled amusement and scrutiny from one face to the other.

"Why, that Mr. Hollis had asked Mrs. Granger to lead with him."

"Well, I didn't know,—at least, he didn't say anything about it."

"But you knew it, did you not?"

"Why, of cose," says Mr. Ray, in his softest blue-grass; "I've known it all along. Anybody who knew Tommy Hawlis at all would have known just what to expect."

"And you wouldn't give us warning?"

"Why, certainly not. It wasn't a matter a man could speak of very well, that I can see. If you ladies wanted to choose Hawlis to lead for you 'twould have been a mighty indelicate piece of business for any one of us to say a word, no matter what we thought. But awnest, now, didn't you just know that that was the first thing he would be apt to do?" And Mr. Ray's dark eyes were twinkling under their heavy brows, in his evident, mischievous delight in the situation.

"Never dreamed of the possibility of such a thing!"

exclaimed Mrs. Turner. "Now, I'm going right up to Mrs. Atherton's. She's the one that would have him for leader,—she and Mrs. Gregg."

"Don't trouble yourself, Mrs. Turner," laughed Ray. "Here comes her ladyship now, and Mrs. Gregg with her. What wouldn't Blake give to see this fun?" he muttered to Truscott.

"I declare, Mr. Ray, you deserve to be—scratched," fiercely vociferated Mrs. Turner, who caught his last words, just as the hall-door flew open and in came the ladies from "the head of the row."

"Well! no use asking if *you've* heard," exclaimed the foremost, "here's Mrs. Turner. But did you ever —did you *ever* hear anything quite so outrageous? Now, I just knew that he would go and ask her, but what could one say when everybody else was bent on having him to lead."

"Oh, Mrs. Atherton! I'm sure I said everything I could to dissuade you and Mrs. Gregg. You knew who I wanted all the time."

"Why, Fanny Turner!" burst in Mrs. Gregg. "When I suggested Mr. Clark or Mr. Ray, you scouted the very idea. You said they were both too old and poky. Oh, Mr. Ray, I didn't see you at all."

"Mrs. Gregg, how can you say such a thing? I wanted Mr. Clark or Mr. Ray or almost anybody to lead all along. Didn't I, Nellie?" appealingly to Mrs. Raymond; and Mrs. Turner's soft cheeks were flaming high with their battle-colors.

But Mrs. Raymond, too, was talking vehemently. In fact, by this time four out of the eight women

present held the floor and refused to yield. Under cover of a fire of excited comment and controversy the two men slipped quietly away, leaving the conversational whirlpool in full and resistless swing. From unanimous condemnation of their chosen champion and leader the congress had suddenly turned upon his luckless partner.

"Surely she must have sense enough to know. Surely she declined," suggested Mrs. Raymond.

"Not a bit of it! Accepted, quite as a matter of course," said Mrs. Atherton, sitting very erect. "Hasn't she been the belle here for two years past? Didn't she look upon it quite as her due? Why," and then as though suddenly overcome by a new and overwhelming sense of the calamitous result of their choice, "did you ever dream of such a possibility? Now, Mrs. Stannard, would you have thought any man capable of such—such——?" And here the justly irate lady broke off helplessly, words failing to express her due sense of the enormity of Tommy's conduct.

"Well," answered Mrs. Stannard, reflectively, her blue eyes twinkling the while, "I was here, you know, much of the summer, and saw rather more of Mr. Hollis after he returned from leave——"

"Yes, and *I* heard," burst in Mrs. Turner, "that he got that leave a month after she went to the seashore, and that he never spent six days of it at home; he was with her at Seagirt every moment of the time."

"But really, Mrs. Stannard," persisted the colonel's wife, who already knew not a little of Mrs. Turner's impetuosity of opinion, and wanted something more stable, "you, of course, knew more of Mr. Hollis

than most of us. Did you actually believe he could be such a—be so—— Well, did you suppose he could do such a thing as to ignore all the ladies of his own regiment, in their own german that they had chosen him to lead, and then go and ask a stranger to lead this german with him? Now, I admit that we who were of the committee decided on him as the leader, but would you—*could* you have suspected his doing such a thing as that?"

Mrs. Truscott bent low over her busy needle, but stole an expressive glance at Mrs. Stannard's laughing face.

"I declare," exclaimed Mrs. Gregg, "I just believe you two knew all the time and wouldn't tell it."

"What could I tell?" laughed Mrs. Stannard. "I hardly knew her at all. But Mr. Hollis, possibly, reasons that it was just what the proprieties in the case demanded. He is but a new-comer, and was selected over all the—well—real officers of the regiment, so he decided to make a somewhat similar choice."

"Oh, what an outrageous explanation! Oh, Mrs. Stannard, how can you? I declare, I think you are just enjoying our mortification." These and other exclamations in swelling chorus greeted the half-mirthful, half-mischievous theory of the major's bonny wife.

"Well, I know just what I shall tell him!" exclaimed Mrs. Turner. "I know that if he offers to take me out I shall refuse."

"I declare, I'll never dance with him again," protested Mrs. Gregg. "I think his conduct simply exasperating, and the sooner we tell him the better it will be."

"You do not mean that now you are going to let him see you disapprove his choice?" was Mrs. Stannard's anxious inquiry.

"Indeed I am! Indeed, I think it's the duty of the ladies of this regiment to let him see how indignant we are."

"Indeed, I think so too," declared Mrs. Turner.

"Indeed, it would serve him right," thought others present; and matters began to look unpleasantly squally for Hollis.

Mrs. Stannard shook her head doubtfully, and looked at Mrs. Atherton for support.

"Oh, I knew you wouldn't approve any rebuke," said Mrs. Atherton.

"No, it would be a great mistake, in my opinion," said Mrs. Stannard, being personally addressed again. "He was formally notified of his selection, as I am told, and given to understand that he was to choose his own partner. Am I not right?"

"Yes, certainly, that's what I told him," said Mrs. Atherton, somewhat hesitatingly; "but then who on earth would suppose—— Oh, well, what is the use of my saying more on the subject!" And madame threw herself back in the luxurious lounging chair and fanned her flushed cheeks with her handkerchief.

"Well, she has as formally accepted, so I understand," continued Mrs. Stannard. "Wasn't that what Mr. Hollis told the colonel?"

"Catch her declining such a chance," pouted Mrs. Turner.

"Yes. Of course the colonel sent for Mr. Hollis this morning to hear his story of this strange accident

to Mr. Blake last night, and Hollis explained his long visit there by saying that he was going over the figures for the german with Mrs. Granger, who was to lead with him,—our german, O misery!" And Mrs. Atherton's eyes were cast heavenward in tragic despair, as once again the full force of their calamity burst upon her.

"I'm afraid that it will only make bad worse to say anything about it to him now," continued the major's wife, after waiting a moment for comparative silence to be restored. Laughter and lamentations were pretty equally matched for the supremacy in that fair convention. Even its most indignant member could not but see something, at least, of the comical side of the question.

"Mrs. Stannard! You don't mean he would go and tell her?"

"Well, do you not think it quite possible after what he has done?"

"Oh, he couldn't be such a fool as that," exclaimed Mrs. Turner.

"Well, now, it wouldn't surprise me in the least; would it you, Mrs. Truscott?" said Mrs. Gregg.

"I hardly know Mr. Hollis at all, and have only met Mrs. Granger once, you know, so I could not express an opinion."

Wise young woman! She did not say that bluff old Stannard himself had come bursting in with the news an hour before, apoplectic and shaking with laughter, declaring it was simply a case of retributive justice; but that he and her Jack had solemnly declared there was only one thing left for the ladies to do, and that

was, ratify their leader's choice without hesitancy or delay. Any other course meant a sensation of the first magnitude.

But Mrs. Turner's sad-faced lord had also heard the news at the adjutant's office, where Mr. Billings and other graceless subalterns were splitting their sides over the absurdity of the situation, and had hastened to restrain, if possible, any extraordinary outbreak on the part of his wife, and he had gravely advised her to the same effect and prescribed silence. It was characteristic of Mrs. Turner that this marital caution should be promptly and contemptuously scouted, and that she rushed forth to spread the tidings forthwith, while poor Turner, with a heavy sigh, wandered over to the troop-office, and buried himself in the muster- and clothing-rolls.

"Captain Turner says it serves us right, and we've simply got to stand it. I won't, for one," Mrs. Turner presently made herself heard over the hubbub. "The idea of our tamely submitting to such an affront as that!"

"Well, the colonel thinks so too, and so does Major Stannard, I know," said Mrs. Atherton. "Of course it's hard, but——"

"Hard!" cried Mrs. Gregg; "why, it's simply awful. I suppose we've got to accept it; but, all the same, I mean to give him a hint or two as to what I think."

"And so do I, though Captain Turner says it's the worst thing we can possibly do."

"No; I'll tell you, now," proclaimed Mrs. Atherton, solemnly, "it will never do in the world; it will be

utterly unbecoming in any of us, as Mrs. Stannard says, to show the faintest resentment now. Just let the thing go on. Let her lead. Then—when it's all over and can't be spoiled any further—*then* we can give Mr. Hollis, perhaps, a quiet piece of our minds."

This, indeed, might have been wisdom; but what power can stay the inevitable? It was too much to expect of human nature—woman nature, at least—that Tommy Hollis should be allowed to live and read no signs in eyes, in gesture, or in tongue of the disgrace that had befallen him. And if nothing had been said to him by one of their number upon the subject, would there not still have been some one to bring something to his ears of his heartless, soulless, senseless conduct? Even if no man nor woman at the post were to open his eyes to the error of his ways, could it be conceived of a woman in Mrs. Granger's position that she herself would not well know just what her sisters at the garrison must feel at being thus set aside and the crown awarded to her? What was there in the fabled "Judgment of Paris" to equal this modern instance of utter lack of common sense on Tommy's part?

Fate spared him an explosion until late that day. The interview with the colonel over, he had promptly shaken off his sense of the censure in his commander's grave tones. The colonel could not blame him for not returning to the fort the previous evening through all that gale, neither could he rebuke an officer and a gentleman for spending hours, as it turned out, at Granger's quarter's at the depot, instead of, as supposed, in town. Hollis promptly explained the change in the situation

by saying that not until nearly noon—after he had obtained permission to be absent—had he been notified of the honor conferred upon him, and it was necessary that he should lose no time in consulting his fair partner at once. Atherton would say no more just then, but his manner could imply a good deal, even when he was silent. Hollis had frankly stated that he desired to go once more to see Mrs. Granger, so as to discuss further figures, etc., since their conference on the previous evening was broken up by Blake's mysterious adventure, and the colonel had decided to let him go. Perhaps he thought that under the circumstances Hollis was better out of the garrison than in it.

And so it resulted that not until after stables did anybody get a chance at him. He came galloping down the bluff, full ten minutes late for his duties, and, all in a glow, rushed up to apologize to his captain, who greeted him gruffly enough to chill anybody else but a sub like Tommy. He made himself unusually energetic and officious around the picket-line that evening, as though in reparation for his sin, and bothered the men not a little by diving in between the horses, and giving voluble hints and corrections on methods of grooming to old troopers, who knew ten times as much about their business as Hollis did. He joined the squad of comrades strolling up to the garrison the moment stable-duty was over, and then the fun began. Lieutenant Crane was one of the party, and he never was known to fail to hit a sore spot, and Crane had happened to drop in at the Wilkins's that very afternoon, and, of course, had learned the news.

"Well, Tommy, my boy, have you made your peace

with the ladies yet? It's your first and last appearance as a german-leader, I'm told."

"Shut up, Crane. It's none of your infernal business," growled the quartermaster, who was just behind. But there were too many present who couldn't help enjoying the fun a little bit, and Crane was not promptly gagged, as he deserved to be.

"Why, what's the matter?" queried Hollis, looking quickly about, and noting the silence that had fallen on the party. The colonel and most of the seniors were trudging along ahead. It was a fun-loving, not to say mischief-loving, crowd into which Tommy had dropped.

"Oh, nothing of any consequence," grinned Crane. "But if I were in your place I would want to crawl into a knot-hole and pull it after me. You were the idol of all the ladies but a week ago, Tommy; and now, as Blake would put it, there's none so poor to do your reverence anything short of a bad turn."

"Here, Crane, you needn't take it upon yourself now to represent the ladies," interposed Clark, who couldn't bear him. "Just mind your own affairs, man;" and the quartermaster was evidently reddening angrily. Crane would have flushed, too, at this interruption, had his cuticle been capable of showing an honest color, but long and constant practice with the bottle had steeped his visage in a purplish dye. He glowered sulkily at his mentor, but said nothing articulate. If there were two men of whom Crane could be said to be afraid, they were Ray and Clark; one of the two was perpetually snubbing him. So long as the party hung together it was impossible to talk further on that subject. The others saw that Clark was right,

and called Hollis aside; but Crane's propensity for mischief was fully aroused, and opposition only made him obstinate. A drink or two at Muldoon's added fuel to the flames, and, catching sight of Hollis coming across the parade the moment retreat roll-call was over, he deliberately hailed him, and, taking his arm in semi-confidential manner, led him along the gravel-path, directly towards the little group of garrison ladies, among whom Mrs. Wilkins would have been easily recognizable in the dark: her voice was unmistakable.

"I'm a friend of yours, Hollis," said Crane, thickly, "and I don't want to see you making blunders all the time. You ought to know what the ladies think of your giving them all the go-by, and waltzing outside the garrison for a partner.—I've just been telling Mr. Hollis you had a rod in pickle for him, Mrs. Wilkins," said Crane, raising his voice so that all could hear.

They had been chatting gleefully together but a minute before. They were mostly of the "Riflers," and the doctor's wife was there; but sure enough, as luck would have it, there were both Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Raymond; and just beyond, Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Gregg, returning homeward after a round of calls, where, beyond doubt, Tommy's atrocity had been discussed in all its bearings.

"Did you, now?" laughed Mrs. Wilkins, loudly. "And why should I care who he leads with? But you are a pretty fellow, Mr. Hollis, I will say; and it's proud we are of you. Aren't we, Mrs. Raymond?"

"Well, I never meant to say a word about it," hesitated Mrs. Raymond, knowing well, in the presence

of ladies of another regiment, this was no place for discussion of such a matter, yet totally unable to resist the longing to make him wince. Her eyes flashed scornfully over his perturbed features, as she added, "It is too soon, of course, to expect Mr. Hollis to abandon old associations; not that I care."

Hollis turned redder every instant, and gazed helplessly from one to the other.

"Here's Mrs. Gregg and Mrs. Turner," exclaimed Mrs. Wilkins. "They're the ones to tell you your sins." But Mrs. Gregg, with a haughty toss of her head and a "good-evening" that seemed to include everybody but Mr. Hollis, passed them by, and trailed on up the walk. Mrs. Turner only slackened speed long enough to say,—

"Well, I *do* think you are a pretty fellow."

"For mercy's sake, what do you mean?" asked Hollis, springing to her side and walking with her. Mrs. Gregg floated airily away before, her head high in air. Mrs. Turner called to her to wait, but wait she would not.

"Mrs. Turner, what have I done?" urged Tommy, vaguely hoping that it might be something other than what he feared.

"The idea of your asking anybody to lead our german for us!"

"Why, I thought she'd be the very one. You see she knows everybody in town."

"Oh, yes," sarcastically; "and undoubtedly it was solely on that account you asked her. Very well, Mr. Hollis; but the next time we give a german——" And Mrs. Turner paused, suggestively.

"You don't mean the ladies are angry at me?" anxiously pleaded poor Tom.

"Angry? Dear me, no; but if you haven't fallen, like Lucifer, son of the morning, just ask Mrs. Atherton; she's got a blessing for you. Ask—well, ask anybody in the —th what she has said, what any one of them has said, for that matter, what they were all saying at Mrs. Truscott's this morning."

Hollis dropped his under jaw aghast. Somewhere down in the benighted depths of his soul he had already felt that there was something amiss about his asking Mrs. Granger to lead with him, but had brushed it airily aside as a matter of no great consequence. Now, however, things were assuming proportions never yet dreamed of.

Mrs. Gregg had gone determinately by, setting her foot down upon her longing to pitch into Tommy on her own account. She had loyally intended abiding by Mrs. Atherton's decision, but she could not resist the temptation of holding up, just a little bit, and listening to the excited colloquy going on behind her. The next thing she was called into action.

"I'll leave it to Mrs. Gregg," said Mrs. Turner, excitedly. "You were there with Mrs. Atherton when she came into the Truscotts'. Didn't she say it was the most outrageous thing she ever heard of?"

Now, while Mrs. Gregg had virtually promised to say nothing of her own opinion, this by no means imposed silence as to those of others. She could make Hollis wince by cracking Mrs. Atherton's whip over his shoulders. She knew well that Mrs. Turner's version of her ladyship's words was greatly overdrawn;

but not more than he deserved. The temptation was too much for her.

"If she didn't *say* exactly that," said Mrs. Gregg, "she probably thought every bit of it." And if ever woman's eyes shot actual daggers at a man, Hollis's thick skin would have been riddled like a sieve then and there.

"Yes, and everybody agreed with her; and all your friends were there, Mr. Tommy Hollis, and not one would speak up for you," added Mrs. Turner.

Hollis looked simply crushed and dazed. "Why, I never dreamed of such a row," he moaned. "What can I do?"

"Do? You've done it!" But just what more might have been said goodness only knows. A door opened close at hand; a stentorian voice shouted,—

"M'riar, come in here!" and Captain Gregg had summarily called off his better half, who had no idea that he was at home and a probable diviner of what was taking place, and Captain Turner had as quietly stepped up the walk, and, linking his arm in that of his pretty and pouting wife, quickly turned the current of talk as the group of ladies came drifting down to join them.

But the mischief was done. Hollis called desperately on one or two of his fair friends in garrison right after dinner; then ordered his horse and galloped away over the hard, resounding prairie.

The next morning a large party of ladies in town were shopping and chatting when Mrs. Granger's stylish landau came whirling by. They looked eagerly at one another, then many of them glanced tentatively at her. She passed them by with cold, averted face, and every one knew what it meant,—Tommy had gone and told her all.

CHAPTER IV.

THE long-expected day had come. The ladies' german was no longer a matter of conjecture or preparation. But, oh, through what trials had not that end been attained and what a whirl of events had been precipitated, all in the space of forty-eight hours, upon the busy garrison. The fierce gale that ushered in the week; old Bryan's escapade; his daughter's strange introduction to the —th; the searching party from "F" troop, and the frozen fingers and noses that resulted; Blake's mysterious mishap, and that equally mysterious mission of Mr. Ray's to Major Granger the moment that grave and spectacled staff-officer returned to his post. These, one and all, would at any other time have proved abundant food for gossip and conjecture. There was the excitement, too, consequent upon news of heavy fighting of the winter column among the mountains far to the north, and the tidings that the wounded were being sent in thither. There was mourning, too, among many soldier-hearts for the brave young lives snuffed out in savage combat. But what—what, said the ladies, was all this compared with the terrific social cataclysm that followed Tommy's election as leader of their german? Never was a party of womenkind so nearly distracted as when the shoppers returned from town that memorable afternoon

and precipitated themselves in congress assembled upon the colonel's quarters.

There was no long speculation as to the cause of the undoubted and undeniable cut given on the public streets by Mrs. Granger to the fair sisterhood from the fort. Mrs. Waldron, of the Riflers, had already heard from friends in town that no words could do justice to Mrs. Granger's state of mind. Mr. Hollis had invited her to be his partner for the german, so she had hastened to tell some of the social leaders of the little metropolis; she had accepted; made all her arrangements, whatever they may have been; and then he had come to her in deep embarrassment to say that he must ask her to release him from the engagement, and she had just dragged from him what the ladies of the —th had said about her. Never had she known such an insult in all her life. Nothing could induce her to attend the german now, or to recognize at any future time any of the ladies of that regiment. She had heard from the Eleventh how rude the men could be, but she never dreamed such conduct possible in civilized women. Of course, her town friends sympathized with her openly and deeply, so long at least as she was present; and said no end of uncomplimentary things about these new people out at the fort, but as promptly modified their views when discussing the matter with Mrs. Waldron, who was a woman of sense and knew the whole story.

All the same, that afternoon congress was a stirring affair.

"They're having a hen convention up at the colonel's, and there's the very devil to pay," said Mr

Wilkins, bluntly, as he dropped in to inquire how Blake was feeling, and found that lank invalid sitting in an easy-chair, with his long legs sprawled half across the room, his faithful comrades Ray and Truscott sitting silently by. Nobody laughed, and Wilkins presently came to the conclusion that a convention of another kind was going on right here, and that he was not wanted. Long experience with the trio had taught him respect for their wishes, and he presently took himself away.

"Did Mrs. Truscott go, Jack?" queried Blake, presently, looking up with his one undamaged eye from under the bandage that encircled his head.

"No," was the brief answer; "she begged off on plea of much to do at home. Mrs. Stannard holds her proxy, if matters come to a vote," he added, with his grave smile. Both he and Ray had early divined that, however humorous the situation might seem to most of the men, there was no fun in it for Blake. He winced at the mere mention of Mrs. Granger's name.

"Hollis said he wanted to come in and see you this morning, Blake," said Mr. Ray, after a pause. "I told him you were asleep, and that after the german would do."

"He resigned the leadership, did he?"

"Oh, yes; but of course they can't accept," answered Ray. "The Lord preserve them! what a stampede they're in this moment! They're no worse off than Granger, though. Wish you could have seen his face when I called, Jack; Blake's left eye isn't a circumstance for blackness."

Truscott's hand was lifted in silent caution. He sat where Blake's drooping moustache could not entirely hide the lines about his mouth, and he saw what Ray did not, but the latter took the hint.

"Has Sergeant Winsor got back from the ranch?" he asked.

"Yes. Old Bryan is all right now, and I hope it will be a lesson to him. The old skinflint would have frozen stiff in five minutes more if Blake hadn't found him just when he did. Think of his attempting to ride back in the teeth of that gale rather than pay hotel bills for a stay over night.

"He claims he was thinking of his daughter," said Blake, "so Mrs. Freeman tells me. Isn't she a loving-hearted woman? You know she is going to send for Nan to come down and spend the night with her; the child longed so to see the german, and Mrs. Freeman has taken a great fancy to her, and made the old man promise she should come. She and the captain drove up there last evening again."

"The chaplain tells me," said Truscott, slowly, "that that child has looked after Bryan like a wife ever since her mother died. Just fancy what a hard life it's been; and in town they will have it he's rich enough to send her to the very best schools in the East. That girl will be an heiress one of these days, and is absolutely untaught."

"Why, can't Mrs. Freeman talk the old miser into doing the proper thing by the child?" asked Ray. "If she can't persuade him, I don't know who can. She's at the conference, isn't she, Jack?"

Truscott nodded; he was tapping his boot-toes with

his light walking stick,—an old trick of his,—and thinking intently. Presently he started up.

"Well, it is time for me to go homeward. Stop and see me a minute before you move further in this matter, Ray. I'll leave you with Blake awhile now." Then turning to the invalid: "So you really want to go over there to-morrow night, old man, and look on?"

Blake nodded. He was in one of his rare moods of taciturnity. "'Twill be only a 'looker-on in Vienna,' Jack, through a peep-hole in the flies."

"There will be several more of us and of our ladies with him, Jack," put in Ray. "Two or three who are in mourning and can't dance, but want to see."

"Oh, all right," said Truscott; "I probably shan't dance much, so I'll come in and have a little chat with you. Ah! the council has adjourned, I see; now for a report of proceedings."

But just what took place at that formidable congress no man ever exactly knew. No stenographic reporter being present, and phonographs being unheard of at the time, only verbal testimony could be adduced, and, oddly enough, no two accounts could be made to fully tally. There was no sign of vacillation among the councillors, however, as they came briskly down the road. Mrs. Atherton's carriage was already at her door. Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Gregg quickly bundled themselves into their furs and wraps and came forth, looking very business-like.

"By Jove! they're going down to beard the lioness in her den, Jack," laughed Ray, as he followed his tall friend to the door; and for a moment the two stood there looking at the animated scene up the road, then

Truscott spoke a word or two in low tone and stalked away. In his overcoat of dark blue, heavily trimmed with fur, the ex-adjutant was already beginning to look bulky.

"Is it presumptuous to ask the result of the conference?" queried he of Mrs. Stannard, who nodded laughingly to him as she opened her own door, just beyond. She shook her head.

"Wait a moment till I have seen Luce," she answered; "then I am coming in to report to Mrs. Truscott. Perhaps, though, Mrs. Turner will tell you first."

That Mrs. Turner was dying to tell somebody was evident, for the pretty features of that volatile young woman were darkened by a frown and a pout of wondrous dimensions as she came down the walk, fairly bombarding Mrs. Wilkins with explosive comments on something that had ruffled her. The captain, however, had no great desire to satisfy his natural curiosity at such a fount, and would have slipped quietly within doors had she not seen and called to him,—

"Oh, Captain Truscott, wait! I know Mrs. Truscott will want to hear all about it, and I'll just come in and tell her."

It was beyond him, of course, to refuse. He opened the door, and there was Mrs. Grace, looking very expectant, happy, and bubbling over with laughter. She had heard, and well knew just what was passing in Jack's mind, and so decided to put a stop to all extended confidences or calumnies by throwing his big circular over her shoulders, and coming boldly forth and meeting the visitor half-way.

"I saw the carriage, and Mrs. Atherton and the others getting ready, and couldn't help coming out to wish them good luck and safe return," she laughed.

"Then, of course, you know what was done?" said Mrs. Turner, her cheeks a dangerous red.

"I did not, until I saw the carriage."

"But now you understand, of course? Isn't it shameful? A committee of three to go down on their knees to Mrs. Granger, and beg her to forgive us and come and lead our ball; and our colonel's wife at the head of it. Oh!" with a stamp of her foot and a vicious biting of her pretty lips. "If your mother were only back with us now, Grace, such things couldn't happen in the —th. *She* wouldn't permit us to be humiliated."

"I can hardly fancy mamma as young enough to take any more active part in a german than that of receiving," said Mrs. Truscott, well knowing how her mother's imperious disposition had set this very lady's tongue to wagging against her time and again. A peep up into the captain's face was additional incentive to put the younger matron upon her guard.

"Well, don't you think it's simply monstrous that now that Mrs. Atherton should insist on our all virtually apologizing to Mrs. Granger, because that high and mighty dame saw fit to cut us?"

"Well, do you mean it is solely Mrs. Atherton's doing?" smiled Grace, linking her hands about her husband's stalwart arm and shamelessly drawing close to his side,—"publicly cuddling him," as Mrs. Turner disdainfully expressed it afterwards. "I'm sure I thought that quite a number agreed that there must

be no misunderstanding whatever, and that it was really her due that the managers should assure her that, so far from resenting, as she was told, they ratified Mr. Hollis's choice."

"Grace Pelham Truscott! If your mother could hear you—— Well! What do *you* think she would say, Captain Truscott? I'm sure you had abundant reason to know she could express herself," flashed Mrs. Turner, well knowing that in this allusion to a prominent landmark in regimental traditions her shaft would find its sting.

But Truscott's armor of calm superiority seemed impervious as ever. A grave smile was lurking under his moustache, as he glanced down at the picture of pouting, petulant womanhood before him.

"Mrs. Pelham would have had no other course in this matter than that which most of the other ladies seem to have taken."

"Most of them! Just only those who are under Mrs. Atherton's thumb, and don't dare call their souls their own," exclaimed Mrs. Turner, still full of battle and excitement. "She would have made it lively for Mr. Hollis, though, even if she had to abide by his choice. That's what your mother would have done, Grace."

"That is quite possible," smiled the captain, imperturbably. "In which action I fancy she would have had your entire sympathy. Now here comes our embassy."

And as he spoke, the colonel's carriage came whirling down the road, bearing, bundled in robes and furs, Mrs. Atherton and her two coadjutors of the committee who nodded and smiled to Grace as they went

spinning by, Mrs. Truscott waving her handkerchief about her bonny head in parting salute; Mrs. Turner obstinately turning her back.

"Did you see?" asked Mrs. Gregg. "She wouldn't even look at us, and she ought to be thankful she doesn't have to go."

"I'm sure I wish none of us had to go," said the colonel's wife, "and I wish we were well out of it. Now, just one word. Of course, she must see us when we send in our cards, and I shall open the subject instantly, and close it in just as few words as I know how. You needn't laugh, Mrs. Freeman, I can be very concise when I try."

"Oh, I'm laughing with joy that I don't have to do the talking, and shivering with premonition of the freezing she has in store for us."

"Freeze or no freeze, she's got to come down," were the determined words of the social head of the regiment, for when that accomplished lady resolved on a point it was apt to be carried, no matter who opposed. And so, just after the trumpets chorused the "retreat," back came the embassy, triumphant, with all eyes upon them.

"Well?" said the colonel, as he lifted her ladyship from the carriage, while Coyle, the "striker," lugged out the robes and enabled the chief to unload the other dames.

"Well, I'll tell you presently. Oh, she had to come down," nodded Mrs. Atherton, sagely, as she saw signs of mirthful question as to the success of her mission quivering about the corners of her husband's handsome mouth. "She just had to. But if you think it fun to thaw out an iceberg, just try Mrs. Granger."

"Indeed, colonel, we never could have faced her without Mrs. Atherton," said Mrs. Gregg. "She would have withered Mrs. Freeman and me."

"Yes-s, I know how awe-inspiring my wife can be," laughed the colonel. "Now, my dear, you should insist on your colleagues coming in and having a glass of sherry in honor of your successful diplomacy."

"And have the whole post flocking over here in five minutes to get the news,—and all the sherry in the house. Colonel, you're wild. Here's Captain Gregg now, and Mr. Billings will be delighted to see Mrs. Freeman home. Won't you, Mr. Billings?" with that confident proprietorship which the colonel's wife must ever feel in a loyal adjutant.

"I'm here for the express purpose," proclaimed Mr. Billings. "If I go home without full details of the result of your mission, Mrs. Billings will boomerang me back here for particulars."

"Well, Evelyn" (the ladies had been schoolmates, you will understand), "you can tell Mr. Billings; but mind, not a word elsewhere until we meet to-night."

And so, as Mrs. Freeman tripped away, escorted by her stanch friend the adjutant, she gave a little shiver of relief and rejoicing.

"I wouldn't go through another such scene for anything. Captain Freeman told me just how it would be, but I couldn't believe a woman would be so repellent."

"What did she do?" queried Mr. Billings, not unnaturally.

"Nothing. Just stood like a tragedy queen—a Mary Stuart—and looked at us. Do you know she

never asked us to sit down until just as we were going?"

"Well, she's coming, isn't she?"

"Coming? Yes. Why, the woman has one gown never yet worn, and Mrs. Waldron says she has had it reserved for this, just to utterly paralyze us all. She *has* to come. There will never be such a chance, hereabouts at least, until that gown is entirely out of style; and I'm told it's the loveliest thing ever brought from Paris."

But here a brace of boisterous, rosy-cheeked children threw themselves upon her from around the corner of her cottage and clamored for their supper. Captain Freeman made his appearance, lounging at the door, and, hugging her babies to her heart, the blissful mamma evidently had no further time for words, and Mr. Billings trudged on along to his own roof-tree, where his better half awaited him.

"Well, does she lead?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Mr. Billings, blankly. "She's coming, though," he averred, triumphantly, unwilling to appear uninformed of the great result.

"Coming? Of course," was the withering reply. "Any woman knows that. The one thing we want to know is, will she lead? Well, your tea's waiting," she added, with despairing sigh. It seems there are just some things which most men are too hopelessly stupid ever to understand.

But by tattoo that night the result was everywhere known. Mrs. Granger could not but accept the overtures made her in all good faith. She was, indeed,

glad to find that she had been misinformed as to the remarks made; she would be glad to accept the charming invitation of the ladies of the —th for the german; but as to leading—on that point she must consult her husband.

"And I just wish you could have seen the air with which she said it," exclaimed Mrs. Gregg. "If ever wifely devotion, injured innocence, and matronly dignity were thrown into one downward sweep of the lashes, it was there. She'd make a fortune on the stage. I wish I had her gifts,—of that kind, that is," she added, hastily, for Mrs. Gregg would not have it supposed for an instant she envied any woman her figure. It was a point on which she was easily content. Too easily, said her associates.

At tattoo Mrs. Granger's note arrived, and Major Granger himself was the bearer. Leaving it in the hands of Mrs. Atherton, saying courteously there was no reply and that he wished to see the colonel, he joined that officer and begged to be shown to the quarters of Lieutenant Blake. The results of tattoo roll-call were just being reported out on the moonlit parade, and no sooner had Mr. Ray made his precise salute and statement of the presence of his troop than the colonel called him to his side.

"Major Granger is here, and wishes to see Mr. Blake; will you show him over to your quarters?"

"I will show him over, sir, certainly," said Ray. "This way, major."

In silence the two officers strode across the level sward, across the frozen *acequia* and the little parapet of bunch-grass at the edge of the parade, the only place

where the snow seemed to settle. Other dark figures were stalking through the dim light towards the long row of brown cottages. One of these the lieutenant hailed in low tone.

"Oh, Truscott, hold up a moment!" And the tallest of the number held up accordingly, gravely lifting his forage-cap with evident surprise, but without a word, when he saw who was his friend's companion. Silently the three crossed the hard frozen roadway and finally reached the white gate in front of Ray's quarters. One or two men whom they passed glanced back quickly as they caught sight of the grim, spectacled face between the two brown-moustached troopers, then found it expedient to linger a moment at their own gate-way and look curiously towards Ray's. It was there the trio halted.

"These are Mr. Blake's quarters," said Mr. Ray, turning sharply and confronting Major Granger at the gate. Like Roderick with Fitz-James, he had led his convoy safe "to Coilantogle Ford," as had been agreed; but now there was steely menace in his voice. He challenged the purpose of his coming, Truscott standing calmly by:

"And now, what may be your pleasure, major?"

"Is Mr. Blake sleeping?" was the response, as the spectacled eyes gazed fixedly beyond towards the dark door-way, as though ignoring all opposition.

"Asleep or awake, sir, it makes no difference, as you ought to know. Let me remind you now in all courtesy that, after our conversation, there can be no communication on your part with Mr. Blake except through me."

"Pooh!" was the impatient reply; "I recognize no middlemen in such matters, Mr. Ray, and I want no airs or graces."

"Pardon me one moment, sir. Words such as you are using only make matters worse. If you have anything to say or to send to Mr. Blake, Captain Truscott will inform you and well knows that I am designated to receive it. He refuses to see you, sir, in person."

"By God! Mr. Ray," was the wrathful answer, as the elder man looked vengeance at his placid opponent, "you are mixing yourself in this matter most impudently. I know your damned Kentucky customs, and I won't be governed by them."

"You will be governed by the customs of gentlemen in like cases, major," was the response, in the same placid, almost pacificatory tone. Ray disdained to take note of personal affronts when handling a matter for a friend. "However little you may be accustomed to them, you will find it necessary to observe these little airs and graces, as you call them, though you do not belong to a combatant branch of the service."

"I've been too long in the army to take lessons from young whip-snappers," shouted Granger, in a rage. "If I'm not permitted to see Mr. Blake I'll make it my business to herald this matter in a way you'll suffer for. The army shall hear of it."

"And that portion of it on which you are an encumbrance may possibly sympathize with you, sir, but the rest of it won't. Look you here, Granger. You don't fight, it seems, so I shall not tell you just exactly what I think of you; but the least a man in your position can do is to guard his tongue. You are a regular

attendant at church, it seems, though the saints forbid I should call you a Christian; but I am minded of a bit of the catechism I learned when a boy that strikes me as signally applicable to you in your department: Keep thy hands from picking and stealing, thy tongue from evil speaking, lying, and slandering."

"You'll rue this, sir. You'll rue it," coughed Granger, hoarse with rage.

"Don't shake your fist at me, Granger. Keep that for your wife."

The major recoiled a pace as though struck, then stood and shook and glared at Ray; but he dropped his hands at once. He seemed choked with rage and unable to speak.

"Have you more to say, sir? Did you suppose no one knew? You poor devil! Take him away, Jack." And Truscott led the major silent from the scene. Some doors banged up and down the row. "Taps" was floating out on the still night-air when the official of the staff department was bundled into his ambulance,—not her landau,—and Truscott passed him out over the sentry-line by the shortest road for home. Granger had attempted one word with the captain, but was cut short.

"I must decline to discuss the matter with you, sir. It lies between you and Mr. Ray."

And so the great day of the german was here. It was known that something took place down at Ray's gate the previous night. It was known that Mrs. Granger's ultimatum was that she would attend, but would not dance; and then at last was the arrangement made that Mr. Hollis should lead alone.

That night, just as Mr. Tommy was smilingly leading forth Mrs. Turner to begin the second figure, just as the full orchestra of the —th swung into the magic rhythm and verve of the "New Vienna," the cavalry sergeants stationed by the flag-draped entrance at the lower end of the brilliantly-lighted, beautifully-decorated room with its fringe of lovely women and attendant officers, drew back the shrouding folds of the colors, and—there she paused as it were at the threshold and seemed to bid them gaze. For a moment lights, flowers, music, partners, all were forgotten. Hollis and Mrs. Turner, as though transfixed, stood with the rest and gazed, gazed their fill.

Behind the canvas flies on the stage, a tall slip of a girl, with great brown eyes and hair like a mane of ruddy bronze, gave a gasp of wonderment and delight. "Oh, isn't she beautiful!" and instinctively stretched forth a hand to the tall, pallid officer who was peering through an eye-hole. But he never heard; never replied. Again she spoke, then turned, and regarded him wistfully, wonderingly, and then sat down, resting her chin on her hand, with a sigh that she herself could not account for; with eyes that never left his face.

CHAPTER V.

"WASN'T that theatrical, madame?" whispered Mrs. Gregg to the colonel's wife the first moment she could reach her ear.

"Ah, but wasn't it effective?" was the answer. "Did you ever see anything more magnificent than that gown?"

"Unless it were the figure and the general effect," laughed Mr. Ray, who was Mrs. Atherton's escort at the moment. "She's ruined Tommy's figure for him,—figure two, I mean,—for no one would care to dance until he or she had gone up and done homage."

"Your friend Mrs. Granger is worth seeing this night, anyhow," said Mrs. Wilkins, boldly, to the leader of the german as the musicians were having their brief rest before beginning the third figure. "It's all Worth though, I suppose."

"How do you mean?" asked Mr. Hollis. "I never saw her when she wasn't to be admired."

"Then it isn't her dress that's all Worth?" queried the most independent woman in the —th, looking with an insolent smile up into the perturbed features of Mr. Hollis. "*That's* all Worth, anyhow, or I haven't been in Arizona five years for nothing."

"I'm blessed if I can understand you, Mrs. Wilkins. Do you want an introduction? She's surrounded now."

And Hollis looked suspiciously into the broad face, half-mischievous, half-quizzical, grinning up into his.

"Indeed, no, Mr. Hollis. When I do I'll be presented in jew form by calling upon her in proprya persony. It's the gown she wears that I most admire, Tommy; but you needn't tell her that, as you did what the other women said. Move on, Wilkins," she added to her obedient spouse, whose full uniform seemed more than usually snug and unbecoming. "The old man," as he already spoke of himself, was gaining flesh all too rapidly, but wisdom came not with it.

"What do you want to chaff the boy for, Jane?" he protested. "Hasn't he worry enough?"

"You mind your own concerns, Wilkins. I can take care of mine. It's her ladyship, Mrs. Atherton, I want to salute next. Take me to her."

But the benevolent design was not carried into effect. "Her ladyship" saw her coming; knew well that the irrepressible tongue of the woman would immortalize itself in some way, and, quickly turning from the group of ladies with whom she was chatting, murmured to Mr. Ray,—

"Quick, take me over to that party of townspeople before she can reach us,—Mrs. Wilkins, I mean. I know she means to say something horrid. Now you'll be sure and take Mrs. Granger out this next figure."

"Oh, she'll be led out often, you may depend upon it," said Ray, deftly evading the mandate. "Your commands have been laid upon the whole regiment. The colonel takes her out first, I suppose?"

"Certainly. It's arranged that Mr. Hollis starts the next figure with Mrs. Freeman. She takes out the colonel, and he goes at once for her. This night every man in the —th must stand by us and make that woman come out of her shell. Afterwards you can do as you please."

At this instant the music began. All promenaders on the floor, with the strict sense of discipline that pervades a military cotillon, at once sought their places. In the twinkling of an eye the entire space was cleared, and a long rectangle of glistening white canvas shown under the swarm of Chinese lanterns pendent from the flag-draped roof. Both long sides of the room were taken up by the dancers; the ladies, in their dainty toilets and with fluttering fans, seated, each with her attendant cavalier in full uniform, or the conventional black and white, as he happened to be military or civil by profession. Behind the row of camp-chairs, sacred to the use of the thirty couples in the dance, was a row of seats for lookers-on. Right in front of the stage were the pretty tables, on which were heaped the favors made with such loving hands by the ladies of the regiment; and here were seated Mrs. Waldron, of the Riflers, and Mesdames Wilkins and Heath, of the —th, who, not being on the dancing-list, had kindly consented to dispense the dainty trifles. Mrs. Wilkins could not be left out in the cold altogether. She was loyal to her regiment, a wonderful hand in helping out with the punch, the supper, etc., and while she was to have exclusive jurisdiction in the supper-room, still she could not there see the german, and that would never satisfy her. Mrs. Wilkins was a woman who wanted to see

and hear, as well as say, everything. Down at the lower end of the long room a number of officers and visitors stood looking on, while a dozen ladies not dancing were seated in a semicircle, leaving only the clear space that led to the ladies' dressing-rooms, that flag-draped arch-way guarded by those two splendid-looking troopers. The entrance to the men's room was neither draped nor sentinelled. In there lay the card-tables for those who preferred whist and a quiet smoke. Beyond that the buffet, where Mrs. Atherton's own redoubtable D'Orsay —a sable dignitary, who had been attached to her household for years—dispensed champagne-punch with lavish hand. Long before the war he had won the title, when a mere stripling Ethiop, of "Count d'Orsay," and had attracted the colonel's attention in the early days of the war by the magnificence of his manner when waiting on the officers who dropped in at the hotel where he was then a servitor. D'Orsay was transferred to the personal staff of the young officer upon his accession to the command of a brigade, and had served with him ever since. The men called him Dorsey. Two trim maids—Mrs. Atherton's and Mrs. Freeman's—were in attendance at the ladies' dressing-room. These rooms, as well as the space partitioned off for card-rooms, etc., were at the southern end of the long wooden barracks, and the windows that gave them light by day were boarded up on the inside, nor was there admission to them except through the main entrance. That the maids, after attending to the wants of the various dames, should spend most of the time close by the draped entrance, peeping through at the dance, whispering to each other, and making eyes at the sergeants

on duty, is recorded here as a probability. The other details are matters of fact, and both had their bearing on the subsequent events of the night.

At the moment when the music for the third figure began, Mrs. Granger, superbly poised as well as dressed, was waving her fan in slow, graceful movement, and conversing graciously with a party of officers and ladies, prominent among whom were Mrs. Stannard, leaning on Captain Turner's arm, and Mrs. Raymond with Captain Gregg, while several of her friends from town stood admiringly by. If ever she had seen fit to resent the language of the ladies of the —th, as reported to her, not a vestige of her wrath was visible to-night. No more graceful dignity than she had shown when greeting the reception committee could have been possible. After the momentary sensation that attended her appearance at the barrier she had laid her hand upon her husband's arm and, with a look as though gently chiding him for having kept her waiting there in that embarrassing way, moved slowly forward as though in search of the officials whom she should first accost. These ladies might almost be said to have rushed upon her in their determination to make her welcome cordial. She was quickly surrounded and, transferring her hand to the arm of Major Waldron, released her spectacled ghost of a spouse with the brief remark, "You have been kept too long waiting for your whist, dear; I won't detain you now;" whereat Granger had lost no time in seeking the card-room. Waldron was still at her side when the music began, and at the instant, and before her escort could find her a seat, Hollis and Mrs. Freeman—two beautiful dancers

—had spun across the canvas; the latter, with her red-gold hair all one sheen of ripples and her lovely face half-flushed with the excitement of the moment, had fairly thrown herself out of Tommy's encircling arm. He would have been only too glad to make the circuit of the room with so exquisite a partner, commanding all eyes, Mrs. Granger's included, as he well divined, for he was at his best when on the floor. But Mrs. Freeman was one of the conspirators, and would brook no delay.

"Just a turn, now, mind," she beamed up into the colonel's face, as she pinned the dainty little fan beside the corps badge on his breast. "Mrs. Atherton says not a moment must be lost." And before the colonel had "half-settled down to his work," as he laughingly expressed it, she had as abruptly left him close to where Mrs. Granger was just gracefully sinking into her seat.

"This is for her," whispered Mrs. Freeman, thrusting a little gilded sabre into his hand. "Pin it where the yellow ribbon will show against the lace, not the silk." And then, with glowing cheeks, she threw herself upon her tall husband, who, never dancing himself, could never resist the fascination of watching her.

With the eyes of half the room upon him, the colonel marched straight to Mrs. Granger, holding the dainty toy to which was pendent a little silver number,—that of the —th. She looked at him with utter surprise as he bowed with soldierly grace.

"The first sabre we lower to-night is in salute to you, madame. May I have the honor?"

"Oh, just didn't he do it splendidly? Didn't I tell

you?" said Mrs. Atherton in triumphant delight to Mrs. Stannard. "Come, rise up Mrs. Granger, you are conquered now," she continued behind her fan. And, as any one could see, there was simply nothing for Mrs. Granger but victorious surrender. She had to rise that the colonel might affix her souvenir to the billow of creamy lace upon her breast, but she could not control the wave of crimson that swept to her very brows, and her eyes flashed their pride and pleasure as, with winning smile, she looked up into his face, then placed her hand upon his shoulder. It seemed as though the whole room gave a sigh of relief and satisfaction as the colonel's arm slid round her shapely waist, and away they went in long, gliding waltz-step. Nothing but a deep-rooted sense that no demonstration would be appropriate kept down the impulse to applaud. In another moment half a dozen couples were circling and whirling about them, and everybody drew a long breath. It was the sensation of the evening—until after supper.

Clark, the handsome quartermaster, was dancing with Mrs. Gregg,—a second choice, though the lady did not know it. He had asked Mrs. Truscott, but that fair young matron had begged to be excused. "We are only going for a little while, just to look on, Jack and I," she said; but the truth was she actually would not engage herself to any man for even three hours. Jack might get bored and want to go home, or, heavens! Jack junior might wake up while she was gone, and King Baby was lord of all just now, even the stalwart captain being deposed in his favor. And so, leaning on her husband's arm and standing

near the upper end of the room, Grace was a most interested witness of the scene when Clark sprang forward. His partner was dancing at the moment:

"Please, Mrs. Truscott, just one turn."

She would have declined again, dearly though she loved to dance, but her husband bent down and whispered,—

"Yes, dance a few minutes, Grace. I want to slip behind the scenes to Blake."

"But where will you come for me?" she pleaded, looking wistfully back with her heavily-lashed eyes. "Remember Mr. Clark has a partner."

"Mr. Clark's partner is out most of the time," laughed that gentleman, rejoicing that he had his prize. "I'll take you back behind the scenes as soon as we have danced. I want no other fellow to cut in and get you."

Clark was an admirable waltzer and he loved to dance with Mrs. Truscott, whose slender foot, he swore, was not only the prettiest but the lightest in the regiment, and they made a perfectly-matched couple as they seemed to float away over the canvas, circling in and out among the other dancers. It was a violation of the strict tenets of the cotillon, perhaps, but there was abundant room, and Tommy Hollis, so far from rebuking Clark for his unauthorized appearance on the floor, made a run from Mrs. Turner's seat and took a slide up alongside.

"Now, Mrs. Truscott, I speak for the next," he cried.

"Hush, sir, you're forgetting Mrs. Atherton's injunction. You are to take Mrs. Granger out the very next figure."

"That's all right, but this one isn't half over. Wait a moment." And with that he whipped out his little silver whistle and signalled the dancers to their seats. "Now just one turn, Mrs. Truscott, while the next couple leads out." She could not refuse. It seemed to be an unwritten law among the officers of the —th to make much of Mrs. Truscott, not only on her own account, but because they loved her old father, their former colonel, and did not love her mother, who had vehemently opposed her marrying the man of her choice but subsequently had so far relented towards him and forgiven her as to display an entire willingness to live with them the year round,—a visitation which the colonel's daughter was so undutiful as to discourage. She and Mrs. Freeman shared about equally the devotions of the entire commissioned force, married and single, but no two women in the —th cared less for the distinction. They would hardly have been women had it been a matter of indifference. Both were young, lovely in face and form, frank and sweet in manner, and both of them hopelessly in love with their own lords. Just as Mrs. Truscott knew he would, Tommy Hollis swung her down the room and close to where Mrs. Granger sat, like a queen enthroned, with a group of courtiers about her. She was fanning herself with slow, languorous movement, her eyes glowing, her cheeks softly flushed, and listening apparently with rapt attention to the words of Dr. Pease and Captain Raymond, who were at the moment bending over her. But she lost not a thread in Mrs. Truscott's dainty toilet as she floated by, nor did she fail to note the triumphant expression in the misguided Tommy's face.

"How charming Mrs. Truscott is to-night," she murmured to Captain Raymond, at the same time fixing her eyes on that young matron with the unmistakable look a woman wears when she wants another to know she is talking about her.

"She is as charming as she looks," answered Raymond, briefly; he somehow did not care to have Mrs. Truscott discussed. "Ah, here comes Captain Gregg to take you out. You are destined to be the belle to-night,—as usual," said that diplomatic gentleman.

"Yes, we are all mad with jealousy already, Mrs. Granger," declared Mrs. Raymond, who was deposited alongside by her partner just in time to catch the words. "I've seen every man in the regiment hovering about you. *We* never have such attention."

"I can name three, at least, who haven't been near me," was the laughing reply,—"Captain Truscott, Mr. Ray, and Mr. Blake."

"You don't tell me!" answered Mrs. Raymond, rejoicing that there were exceptions after all. "I'm sure I thought every man in the room had thrown himself at your feet. I can't imagine why Captain Truscott and Mr. Ray haven't come; but Mr. Blake isn't here to-night; besides—he's one of our intractables, you know."

"One of your intractables? Do you mean he is not fond of—society?"

"Oh, no; only he's indifferent. I assure you we all gave up Mr. Blake as a case-hardened bachelor long ago."

"I can understand that as possible anywhere except in the —th," was Mrs. Granger's flattering response,

as Captain Gregg led her to the floor, and she smiled back most winningly over his broad shoulder.

"Is Mr. Blake still suffering so much that he could not attend?" she presently asked of Gregg, as they slowly waltzed down the room.

"Oh, he's getting on all right; but a man with a black eye doesn't care to show on the floor. Reckon he's in the whist-room by this time, having a quiet game."

"Mr. Blake—in the card-room!" exclaimed Mrs. Granger, looking up in uncontrollable alarm. "No; no more just now, captain," she continued, disengaging herself from his encircling arm. "I think I'll rest one minute, and—could you get me a glass of water?" She had drawn herself, as she spoke, through the little circle of lookers-on at the lower end of the room nearest the dressing-room.

"Wouldn't you rather have punch? It's undeniable, and its a regimental treat to see D'Orsay ladle it out. It's right here in the card-room."

"And do you allow ladies in your card-room in the —th? I'm sure your predecessors never did last year."

"Allow them? Why, certainly! If we didn't, they wouldn't allow us. The ladies just run this regiment, Mrs. Granger."

"How lovely for the ladies!" was the reply, while a peculiar smile hovered about the corners of her mouth. "I think I have heard something to that effect. Yes, I will go in just to see the redoubtable D'Orsay."

There were only two parties at the card-table as they entered. Major Granger was seated at the one farthest from the door-way and the punch-bowl. Mrs.

Granger's eyes quickly searched the apartment and peered into the dressing-room beyond. To the men who glanced up from their game she vouchsafed a radiant smile, and then bent low over her husband's shoulder with almost caressing gesture. He looked up quickly, his sallow face lighting with unmistakable pleasure as he gazed at her glowing beauty.

"I see you are enjoying it all," he said.

"Oh, it is simply perfect! The ladies of the —th Cavalry have no peers as entertainers," she replied, beaming upon the upturned faces of the major's companions as she spoke; and Lieutenant Wilkins sprang to his feet.

"In the name of the ladies of the —th, permit me, madame, to express their appreciation of a compliment from such high authority," he said, in his old-fashioned and ponderous way. "And may I not pledge Mrs. Granger in a glass of our delicious punch?" he added, striding at once from the table to where D'Orsay, a sable statue, stood behind the huge bowl of dainty china,—Mrs. Atherton's especial pride. Granger scowled malevolently at the interruption to his game; but Mrs. Granger beamed anew.

"Lucky for him Mrs. Wilkins is at the far end of the other room," murmured Gregg into the pink ear so close to his blonde moustache. But Mrs. Granger would not hear. She was fascinating Wilkins now.

"I really thought nothing could tear you enthusiastic whist-players from your game," she laughed. "And are you and Mr. Heath the only gentlemen who care for it? I supposed there would be half a dozen tables going."

"Not when our ladies have a ball, madame. Then every dancing man must do his duty. I'm past my dancing days, and the young fellows like the captain here have to do my share for me.—Just a drop more, D'Orsay.—Madame, the —th drinks your health."

"So Mr. Blake is not a devotee to whist after all," said Mrs. Granger, as they came forth. "Perhaps he prefers your cavalry pastime of poker." And she glanced up with a face in which merriment and mischief were at least the surface indications, yet her eyes watched him eagerly.

"Blake? Oh, no, he never plays poker. It seems on a decline since Ray quit; but I never heard of Blake as a pokerist. Blessed if I know what Blake does do to amuse himself when he isn't gabbling or reading Shakespeare. That fellow's a sort of enigma to me. To be sure, I never served with him before this winter, and he wasn't with us in Arizona."

"In what is he so—enigmatical?" she slowly asked, her eyes downcast at the moment, her voice low.

"Oh, I don't know. He's a ranting, declamatory, noisy sort of fellow when with the crowd, always spouting poetry or making bad puns and parodies; has no intimates but Ray and Truscott, and they swear by him, while the rest of us don't seem to get the hang of him. The ladies think they've got his equation down fine."

"Pardon me, Captain Gregg,—got what?"

"Pardon *me*, Mrs. Granger, that is inexcusable slang; it means they think they have sized him up."

"I see. Got him down and sized him up, and that means——?"

"Oh, it means they understand him better than we do."

"Yes; and what do the ladies say?"

"Why, they think he's been jilted by somebody that he was a good deal in love with, you know."

"How very romantic! And has he no particular friends among them?—none whom he trusts or talks to?"

Blake? Not that I know of. Mrs. Stannard, Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Truscott,—I suppose he likes them most. He's in Freeman's troop, you see, and then he and Truscott read together a good deal."

"Oh, and that reminds me,—you're a friend of Mr. Blake's, are you not?" She looked up eagerly.

"I? Why, of course. I like him first rate. So does the whole regiment, for that matter."

"He dropped a little note-book, or something of that kind, when he was at our house the other night, after —after his horse fell. Could you give it to him for me? I hardly know whom to ask. You're sure he isn't here?—isn't coming?"

"He certainly isn't here, and it's midnight now. I don't think he'll be over at all. Of course I'll be very glad to give it to him."

"Then I'll go into the dressing-room a moment and get it," she quickly answered, slipping her hand from his arm; but at the instant two officers burst through the ring of spectators and made a rush for her,—Mr. Hollis winning.

"Where on earth have you been?" he exclaimed, looking into her face with glowing eyes. "We want to start the third figure,—come." And as all the

room was watching and waiting, she could but go. Obedient to his signal, the music began at once, and at last Mr. Hollis was leading with Mrs. Granger.

Behind the scenes on one side of the little stage sat Mrs. Billings with some friends whose recent mourning prevented their attendance on the floor. On the other, in the dim light of a lamp, Nannie Bryan and two girls of her own age—daughters of officers of the garrison—were peeping through the various eye-holes and chattering volubly. Close at hand sat Lieutenant Blake, silent, and absorbed in the scene in the ball-room. Beside him at the moment Truscott was standing, his face graver than usual.

"Never saw Mrs. Truscott looking lovelier than she does to-night, Jack," said Blake at last, feeling that it was time he said something.

"She seems very well this winter," was the reply; for Truscott well knew that Blake's thoughts were not of her. "How long will you stay here, Blake? It is getting to be known that you are looking on."

"Yes; two or three of our ladies have been in with the customary assurances that it would be simply perfect if it were not for my absence. Pretty figure I'd make to-night. I suppose he's playing whist, Jack?"

"Yes; he will not be apt to come out except for supper. Ray will come here to you after this next figure."

But Blake had ceased to listen. At this moment in excited whispers the young girls near by announced some important event.

"She's dancing with Mr. Hollis," said one. And Blake's eye was back at its peep-hole. Truscott waited

one moment in silence and then stepped softly away. Nannie Bryan crept quietly to the camp-stool by Blake's side.

"If it hadn't been for me—and papa—you would have been dancing with her yourself, wouldn't you, Mr. Blake?" she whispered, looking sorrowfully up into his wan face. For a moment there was no answer; then he turned suddenly:

"I dance with her, Nan? Not if there wasn't another woman in the wide world!"

CHAPTER VI.

SUPPER-TIME had come and gone. Thanks to the admirable arrangements of the committee, all the guests had been seated at once at long tables set in the adjoining building, which was connected with the dancing-hall by a canvas-covered way. The band, too, had been well fed and otherwise comforted, and were now strolling back to their places on the stage, while, over the champagne, the colonel was proposing a toast to the guests of the —th, and his honor the mayor of the neighboring municipality was covering himself with glory and the ladies with confusion by lavish allusions to the loveliness and grace of their entertainers. Major Granger, seated near the bottom of one of the long tables, had slipped away, signalling to his boon companions of the whist-party to follow him. Wilkins —nothing loath—was quickly at his side, for he could not drink his fill of champagne with the basilisk eyes of his better half upon him, while over at the card-room there was peace and—the punch-bowl. But the other two did not so quickly follow. They were prominent "cattle-growers" from town who could play whist any evening, and who preferred listening to the flow of soul and feasting their eyes on the beauty of the women at the banquet-board. The mayor was in the midst of his peroration as Granger and Wilkins van-

ished, unnoticed except by one or two dames whose eyes were everywhere, and by the colonel, who saw it with a feeling of relief. As the senior officer present from the supply departments, Granger would possibly have to be called upon for a few remarks, especially as Mrs. Granger had gone in on the colonel's arm, honored above all women, and was now seated at his right. But Atherton did not fancy Granger, and felt sure he would add nothing to the hilarity or spirit of the occasion.

"I had intended calling on the major next," he murmured to Mrs. Granger, who had just ceased applauding one of the mayor's most eloquent periods, "but I see he has gone. I fear our speeches have bored him The —th isn't very strong in such matters."

"Why, Colonel Atherton! What could have been more appropriate than your opening words; and I am sure Captain Freeman was delightful."

"Oh, some of our younger officers would do us credit, no doubt. Blake is our best card, poor fellow; we miss him to-night, for he never fails to bring down the house. By the way, how fortunate it was, Mrs. Granger, that his horse fell so close to your home. If that had happened out on the prairie he might have frozen before the men could find him. What a fearful night that was!"

"It was fearful, indeed, colonel—— Oh, bravo! bravo!" she cried, clapping her richly-jewelled hands, as, with a magnificent bow, his honor concluded a glowing apostrophe to the Juno-like goddess to whom all men do homage,—the beauteous consort of the gallant colonel of the ever-glorious —th,—and took his seat amidst

thunders of applause, while Mrs. Atherton, from behind her fan, glanced in mingled deprecation and merriment at her laughing cronies up and down the sparkling board, yet recovered herself with becoming promptitude when she saw Mrs. Granger's glass and a score of others raised in her honor, and, with mighty blushes, but most gracious smile, she touched hers to the brimming beaker extended by the now triumphant civil magnate. There were shouts for various names to respond for her,— "Stannard," "Truscott," "Raymond," "Ray," "Ray," "*Ray*." And then it was discovered that Ray was gone.

"If Blake were only here now," almost groaned the colonel. "There's no one to replace him," he added, as he glanced up and down the long tables, passing in review the array of his officers scattered here and there among the guests. Then somebody began, half ironically, to shout for Hollis, and the towns-people promptly and loudly echoed the cry. It was time for decided measures. The colonel knew that, like the Irishman of tradition, Tommy could not open his mouth without putting his foot in it. He caught Raymond's eye, and though that gentleman nodded suggestively towards Truscott,—who persistently looked the other way,—Atherton would stand no temporizing. Up with you, he signalled, and rapped for order; and Raymond slowly found his feet, and had the consummate good luck to preface his remarks by referring to himself as an unworthy substitute for either one or both of the two gentlemen best known to their friends from town, —Messrs. Ray and Blake, who were unavoidably absent. Whereat the room resounded again.

"And has Mr. Blake always been so indispensable a feature in your social gatherings?" asked Mrs. Granger, in low tone to the colonel, as Raymond labored on.

"Ever since I have known him," was the answer. "Although he and I were both comparative strangers to the regiment until within a year or two. I had hardly seen him since the war. He transferred in at the reorganization; then he didn't go out to Arizona until just as they were coming back; but he is one of the characters of the service."

"Eccentric, is he not,—at times?"

"Well, possibly. Oh, but that reminds me, I think I heard that you knew him several years ago." And then it suddenly flashed upon the colonel that the description of the meeting that had occurred at Stannard's quarters warranted the belief that Blake had sought to avoid her entirely. He colored at the consciousness of having, even unwittingly, asked an embarrassing question. But Mrs. Granger's lovely eyes were raised without a shadow. She saw that he was discomfited, and with consummate tact put him at his ease.

"Yes, we used to meet quite frequently when he was a young officer just entering service, and I just entering society; and I liked him very much," she answered, frankly. "But that was so long ago I—I fancy he has almost forgotten it." And then, alert to everything going on about her, she joined in the applause that was mercifully accorded Raymond's effort. Other remarks followed, brief and not over-brilliant, and then Mrs. Atherton gave the signal to rise, and the merry throng came drifting back into the ball-room

just as Mr. Ray appeared from the side door leading to the stage, followed by a soldier who bore a big tray laden with empty plates and glasses.

"You reprobate!" said Mrs. Atherton, shaking a reproving finger at the buoyant young fellow. "Where have you been? We needed you to respond to the toast in our honor, and you had run and hidden, I verily believe."

"I was feeding the ladies at the peek-hole," said Ray. "And now I'm going to see some of them home."

"Oh, surely you're not going yet! You haven't asked Mrs. Granger to dance."

"I haven't danced with anybody to-night, madame. I'm a little lame just now." He hated to refer to the burning pain in his thigh where the Cheyenne bullet had torn its way only six months before; but, better that than admit that the real reason was that he could not ask a lady to dance when he was on hostile terms with her husband. Mrs. Atherton was all prompt sympathy.

"Oh, true, I know. And is Mr. Blake there yet? Did he see it all?"

"Yes, but he wants to stay, and the girls won't listen to the idea of going. Old Bryan's daughter looks as though she thought it fairy-land. You'll forgive my going, won't you?"

"Yes, if you will just take the two sergeants at the dressing-room door and tell Mrs. Wilkins we want them to have a good supper. I know what you want to go for, sir," she concluded, with a wise nod of her queenly head. "I've heard all about her, and I think

it's high time you came and confessed to me." But Ray broke laughing away and signalled to the sergeants to follow him just as Mrs. Granger, leaning on the colonel's arm, reached the flag-draped entrance.

"I will be gone but a moment," she said, as, followed by Mrs. Raymond, she passed within, leaving a little knot of men grouped about the lower end of the room. Some of these, rightly conjecturing that once assembled in a coterie of their own, the ladies would be busily chatting until the music again struck up, slipped away into the smoking-room. Others gathered in a social chat. Tommy Hollis was flitting nervously about, eager to begin the next figure, and Ray had just got back from the supper-room, when Mrs. Freeman, with a pale, scared face, suddenly parted the flags at the entrance and peered forth. Ray sprang instantly towards her. He knew that something was wrong.

"Find Dr. Pease quick and bring him here, but say nothing."

The doctor, smoking a big cigar, was one of the group gathered about Granger's whist-table, where the game was once more in full swing. Ray placed his hand on his arm and drew him quietly to one side.

"You are wanted in the ladies' dressing-room, quick," he said in low tone. Pease tossed away his cigar and slipped past the jovial party now gathered about the punch-bowl, where his honor, the mayor, was telling a story. Major Granger glanced up a moment, followed him with his eyes, and then tossed out the seven of hearts.

"No trumps, partner?" quickly asked the civilian, looking at him in surprise.

"I—I beg pardon. I—I thought that was a diamond," answered Granger, hastily throwing out the six of diamonds and attempting to withdraw the other card.

"I claim a revoke," said Lieutenant Wilkins, eagerly.

"You can't; your partner hasn't played and the error was rectified in time."

"Board's a play! board's a play!" exulted Wilkins, his red face flushing redder, and the punch beginning to show in little beads upon his forehead and in the coating of his tongue, which had thickened perceptibly. "I leave it to any gentleman here."

"You're wrong, Wilkins.—You're right, major. Go on with the game. Do hold your tongue, Patsy." These and other exclamations buzzed about the board. But Granger, ordinarily most precise in play and dogmatic and truculent in argument, said no word whatever. He seemed deaf to the discussion and dead to the game. His eyes wandered to the canvas partition that separated them from the ladies' dressing-room. Suddenly the colonel entered and came straight towards him, and one or two men noted that before he spoke a word or had reached the table Granger was on his feet, looking white.

"Major, Mrs. Granger has had a slight attack of faintness. Possibly you had better go in a moment. I will take your hand. Whose play is it?" he continued, coolly taking the vacant chair.

"Diamonds are trumps, colonel, and I have just led,"

answered Mr. Ainslie. "Major Granger threw on a heart, but rectified the error before Mr. Frazier played. The lieutenant claims a revoke."

"Nonsense!" said the colonel. "It was your king, I presume. Lead again." And Wilkins subsided,—there was no arguing with the chief.

But Major Granger did not return, neither did the music begin. A hush had gradually fallen on the assembly. Presently it was known to everybody that Mrs. Granger had "fainted dead away,"—as Mrs. Turner said,—and still lay in a swoon.

"What on earth is she fainting for this time?" added that injured lady. "Is she subject to fits? She dropped like a log the night Mr. Blake stumbled into her hall, and here she goes again. One would think she had done enough to spoil our german without this sensational climax."

But everybody knew Mrs. Turner was wroth at the attention lavished on the major's beautiful wife, and her remarks fell on unappreciative ears. It is very hard to take the part of one woman against another who is manifestly much more beautiful. It was ten minutes or so before she revived, and twenty before the music was resumed and the german went on. Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Raymond remained with her, so did Dr. Pease. Meantime, an orderly had been despatched for the landau. She had insisted on their resuming the dance at once, but the doctor agreed with her that she had best go home. When the carriage was announced she came forth, hooded and wrapped in some white fleecy mantle than which her face could hardly have had a shade more of color. The dance

was in full swing, but half a dozen ladies hurried after her to the door, and her pathway was lined with men, eager to express sympathy or to be of service. Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Raymond, however, did not come forth from the dressing-room until some minutes after she had driven away, and when they did, their answers to thronging questions were constrained. It was Dr. Pease who supported her to the carriage, Granger following in their wake, somewhat absently saying good-night and his thanks for the sympathy expressed on every hand. The colonel himself accompanied the party to the entrance, and the adjutant sprang upon the box beside the driver to pass the carriage over the sentry lines. The doctor handed Mrs. Granger in and quickly took his seat by her side. Granger followed, his back being now to the front. Captain Truscott stepped hastily forth and turned sharply to the left out of the bright glare that shone from the entrance full upon the stylish carriage just as the colonel extended his hand to wish the party good-night. And Truscott was just in time to intercept a tall figure, muffled in an officer's cape, and to bring it to a halt by the brief, stern words:

"Back, Blake! Don't you see the colonel? This will never do."

And then the landau whirled away. Ten minutes later, when Mrs. Freeman stole behind the scenes to see how her *protégée* was getting on, she found Nannie Bryan looking pale and tired; "ready to go home," she said, though her companions were still alert, devoured with curiosity and interest. What had happened to Mrs. Granger? they begged to know. One of

them—fierce little partisan of her regiment that she was—thought it a judgment that this sudden stroke of illness had come upon her. Blake had gone,—no one knew where or why, unless perhaps it was the silent child who sat there listless and weary. Mrs. Freeman danced just once more, then stole quietly away and took her home. She, too, had had enough of that night's german. Something was afloat that she could not fathom, but that made her pure heart ache.

Just what had taken place can best be gathered from Mrs. Raymond's excited recital. She had followed Mrs. Granger closely as they entered the dressing-room. Both the maids were at the door-way at the moment, and Mrs. Granger had suddenly uttered a cry, rushed forward and picked up from the floor a handsome sealskin sacque. Beside it, half on the floor, half on the chair, was the white mantle she wore over all. Mrs. Granger whisked the sacque from the ground and, with cheeks white as a sheet and eyes that seemed wild with apprehension, had hurriedly examined one pocket after another; then searched the floor; then had as hurriedly drawn aside the folds of the great garrison flag that was draped across the room, and then had fallen like one stricken dead. There was a long rent in the canvas behind the flag, and one could look through it into the men's dressing-room beyond. What she had lost, what she had found, what she had seen, no one knew. The maid declared that no one had entered the room during supper, that Mrs. Granger had carefully rolled and folded her mantle around the sealskin sacque when she arrived and placed it herself upon that camp-chair

in the corner. Neither one of them could account for its being found upon the floor, unrolled.

Another thing that Mrs. Freeman saw and shrank from telling, but that Mrs. Raymond saw and told, was that when Major Granger tendered his arm to his wife to lead her to the carriage, she utterly recoiled from him and turned and almost clung to Dr. Pease.

CHAPTER VII.

BREAKFAST was served at a decidedly late hour in most of the households along officers' row the day that followed the ladies' german. The colonel and his entire commissioned force, of course, turned out at reveille, as was the rule in the —th, and tramped sleepily down to stables. Some of the youngsters, indeed, had not gone to bed at all. It was after three o'clock when the last figure ended, and everybody crowded around the reception committee to declare it the most delightful party ever given at the fort,—"Ever given in the wide world," said the enthusiastic mayor, as he bowed his adieux to Mrs. Atherton. Hollis, too, came in for his share of congratulation. There was no question as to his ability to lead a cotillon when once fairly started; and Tommy shook hands with everybody and received his ovation with all proper modesty; but down in the depths of his heart there was disquietude, if not dismay. Mrs. Granger's sudden illness and early departure from the scene was a source of profound disappointment. Indeed, as he listened to the theories and speculations that fell from the pretty lips of his various partners, it became something even worse.

"What do I think?" said Mrs. Wilkins. "It's as plain as the nose on your face, Tommy Hollis——

There was something in that gorgeous sealskin sacque that wasn't intended for her husband, but he's the man that got it. Maybe it was a letter for you, Tommy."

He was too nervous and excited to go to bed when finally the lights were extinguished and the revellers had strolled homeward across the parade. He knew perfectly well that Mrs. Turner expected him to escort her to her domicile, despite the fact that her lord was patiently waiting in the dressing-room; but he dreaded the questions she would be sure to ask, and the comments she would not fail to make. He would not even join the knot of youngsters who made for the club-room as soon as they got out of their dress-coats. Mrs. Wilkins's theory had taken powerful possession of him and he wanted to be alone.

But there was no dodging the crowd when stable duty was over and the score of officers came strolling up the road,—the youngsters all in a body. He had not slept a wink. He had been turning the situation over and over in his mind, and could think of nothing else. He passed in review all the events of his year's acquaintance with Mrs. Granger; her evident preference for his society at the very start; the delightful winter and spring in which he had been almost always her escort; her avowed fondness for him as a partner in the dance and on their rides; then her unexpected journey to the East, and the prolonged stay at the sea-shore. He well remembered the lowered voice in which she had made the announcement, and the expression of those lovely gray eyes, as she looked up into his face.

"It is my husband's wish," she said; "he thinks I

need the change. But, are you not coming to the East?"

Poor Tommy! He could ill afford it, but this was fascination beyond anything he had ever dreamed of. She was gone when the —th came through on their way to the Indian country. She was away all summer, and in August he got his leave and spent days with her at the sea-shore. Would he ever forget those moonlit nights when the lazy ground-swell broke booming upon the sands, and sent the hissing waters to her very feet,—those dainty feet with their wondrous clocked stockings and the high-heeled, tan-colored shoes. People had begun to look at him askance before he was there forty-eight hours; but what did he care? He knew no one there and cared to know no one but her, and, as for her, was not her husband's mother there to see that decorum was observed? It was a resort where women were many and men were few; where the band played every night at the pavilion, and where many a girl, partnerless, looked on and watched that beautiful Mrs. Granger dance waltz after waltz with the tall, distinguished young officer who was so deeply smitten with her. They knew well enough she was only playing with him and revelling in his infatuation. They could see what he could not, that whenever he had to take a few days for the home people other men came down from town and danced in his stead. She had half a dozen devotees who never saw one another, or, if they did, regarded each other only with the pity due an unsuccessful rival. That delicious month all too soon had come to an end. He had gone back to the frontier to accept his desired transfer to the cavalry; had

ridden to the Black Hills to meet the —th on their homeward way, and, when at last she returned from the East, had hastened to throw himself again at her feet, regardless of the coldness and sarcasms of her rightful lord. Had she not told him she shuddered whenever her husband drew near? Had she not confided to him that it was a hateful marriage into which the prayers of a beloved father had forced her? Had she not half confessed that only in his society did she find life bearable? She was so lonely, so wretched, so wronged; her gay society manner only a mask, behind which in secret she made her moan. How lovely, how pathetic, how—ah, yes, how enticing she looked when, as though overwhelmed by the contemplation of her weight of woe, she had sprung from the sofa on which she was reclining, over which he was adoringly bending, and, rushing to the mantel, had thrown her lovely arms aloft in tragic despair, then pressed her filmy kerchief to her eyes, while great sobs shook her frame, —that willowy, exquisite form. Poor boy! No wonder he rushed with outstretched arms, passionately breathing her name,—Madeleine! and in his wild infatuation would have clasped her to his breast and said heaven knows what. But no. She knew her *rôle* to perfection. The jewelled hand gently but firmly warned him back. With what a world of sweet resignation, of appealing helplessness, of trust and confidence, of sadly smiling, hopeless sorrow she murmured,—

"No, don't—don't make it harder than I can bear, my *one* friend." And her tear-wet eyes gazed imploringly into his, though she let him seize the snowy hand and cover it with his mad kisses. Then, was she not

admirable in the sudden change of tone, pose, expression, *everything* with which she went on?—

"No, Mr. Hollis, honestly, I think you ought not to attempt D'Alroy; Captain Hawtree is very much more your style if you will make up a little.—Come in, dear. We're just trying that scene from 'Caste.' Now, do it again, Mr. Hollis, and you see if I'm not right, major." And there was that grim, spectacled ghost at the door-way, looking sardonically on. Tommy could only turn all the colors in the spectrum and mutter, "Er—er—yes, er—'Caste,'" but thanked God that Granger didn't stay to hear him "read his lines" again. The major went on to the dining-room in those confounded noiseless arctics of his, only remarking that the rehearsal seemed realistic enough to suit the most exacting audience. But she kept gallantly on with her instructions as to the "business" of the part of D'Alroy and with laughing comment on his lack of ardor in the *rôle* of a lover, until Granger once more slouched through the hall and let himself out the way he had not come in,—the front door,—and then she dropped, nerveless, into the great arm-chair.

And yet, with the fatuity of puppyhood, Tommy Hollis galloped back to the garrison believing himself the hero of a romantic and thrilling love-affair with the most beautiful and accomplished woman in the West. When he sought to see her again she whispered caution,—

"Do not try to see me alone any more, just now,—not until I tell you." And obedient to her behest he had ceased going thither every day, and yet invented & discovered incessant excuses for dropping in at the

depot, as all men at the fort could see and all women knew without seeing. Then had come the delicious interview in which he tendered to her the honor of leading the german to be given by the ladies of his own regiment, crowning her queen above them all. Then had followed the strange and startling interruption,—Blake's plunging fall through the door-way. No wonder she fainted,—a woman whose life had been such a nervous strain. Then the next day's visit when he could not see her alone a moment, and then the rueful interview in which he had to tell her he had resigned the leadership and must ask her to release him. She had simply enchained him the more, for she said no word to him of indignation on her own account; it was all sorrow that he should have suffered so much for her sake.

"I must see you—talk with you, just a few minutes to-night," she whispered, as they danced together, though her face was averted, smiling upon the lookers-on as she spoke. "Is the side door to the stage open? Didn't I see Captain Truscott go in there just now? Couldn't we be alone there one minute?" His heart had bounded with thrilling delight.

"I'll fix it somehow," he murmured.

But fate had fixed it otherwise. Could it be as Mrs. Wilkins had said,—it was a letter from him that Granger had captured? He joined the crowd of sleepy, red-eyed youngsters, hoping that in their questions or comments something might be elicited. They were talking of the slit in the canvas partition, but he knew all about that; he had examined it the last thing before putting out the lights. A big bureau

stood in the men's dressing-room beyond the card- and punch-room. It was not visible from the table or from where D'Orsay presided over the bowl. It was an easy thing for any one with a sharp-pointed knife to slit the canvas any desired distance, slip through, raise the folds of the flag beyond, and "raid" the ladies dressing-room while the maids were engrossed in the scene on the dancing-floor. It could have been done unobserved, and who could have done it but Granger? It was an awfully embarrassing affair. But for Mrs. Raymond nothing really need have been known; but she had noted Mrs. Granger's impetuous rush to the partition, had seen her raise the folds of the flag, then fall prone to earth, and of course the moment after she, too, had peered in there and had caught sight of the back of a bureau through the long vertical slit. This confirmed her theory that some one had stolen something from Mrs. Granger's sacque and she could no more keep it to herself than refuse to listen to some exciting bit of gossip. She had shown it to half a dozen women in less than half a dozen minutes, and before the ball broke up almost every one had been in to take a peep at that mysterious gap. The colonel had looked very grave indeed, and had given Mr. Clark directions to see that it was not disturbed all night. It might be possible to discover what sort of a knife had made the slit, for everybody knew nothing of the kind was in the canvas when that bureau was moved in during the afternoon. The colonel had questioned D'Orsay as to the men who had entered the dressing-room. Nearly all of them had, said that dignified servitor, both civilians from town and officers of the

post. The maids stuck to their story, too, and altogether a most unpleasant sensation was afloat. Granger might ransack his wife's pockets as much as he pleased outside the garrison. That was none of their business. But when it came to slicing up their partitions and abusing their hospitality in this way, "By gad," said old Stannard, "it's burglary, whoever did it." And yet when Hollis joined the party the chatter ceased, for they had been discussing the possible object which Granger might have had in view, and Tommy, thirsting for further information, found it impossible to extract a word except in response to direct question. It really seemed to them as though Blake's prophecy had come true, for almost all the officers in the regiment were feeling that Hollis had indeed made a tremendous mess of things.

In silence the party trudged up the slope and came once more in view of the colonel, who had stopped short and was reading a despatch, evidently just brought him by the soldier telegraph operator. He folded it, walked slowly on, accompanied by the major and Captain Freeman.

"Now what's up?" queried Mr. Dana. "There goes the orderly for Billings. It's a detail of some kind. Tommy, you may have a chance to lead a charge instead of a german."

And that it meant something immediate and important was apparent from the fact that, instead of turning in at their respective quarters, the colonel and his staff-officer went on together and disappeared within the gloomy portals of the office building.

"What makes you think it is a detail for a scout?"

asked Hollis nervously of Mr. Dana, as they stood for a moment to note whether or no the colonel went to the office.

"You don't read the signs of the times, Lymph, there were Indians on the Chugwater last week and over at Scott's Bluffs two days ago. There is that convoy of wounded coming down from the Powder River; there is the paymaster's ambulance going up to-day. Three reasons why some of us may look for orders for a winter march. Isn't that so, Hunter?"

"Sure as shooting, Tommy; and ten to one it will be you or Corry that'll have to go, and as you're the senior I'm betting on you."

"You don't really mean it, Hunter?"

"Why, certainly, Lymph. I'll bet you what you like Billings will be down in ten minutes to tell you to get ready."

Hollis's face was wrapped in gloom. For a moment he stood there looking grievously worried and perplexed; then, half hesitatingly, he glanced up.

"But see here, fellows, we're just beginning rehearsals for Caste. We've got to give that play in three weeks, and I don't see how I can go. Don't you think the colonel would make a change if the stage manager were to tell him?"

Dana's ribs ached from the vigorous nudge inflicted by Hunter's elbow.

"Think? Why, Tommy, I don't see how he could have the heart to send you off at such a time. Let's see, Blake's to be stage manager, isn't he? By all means run in and wake him up and tell him of the impending crisis and get him to go to the chief. Oh,

he'll go," added the youngster, sagely, though hardly able to keep a straight face. And then Mr. Hunter slipped up stairs into the one room the crowded condition of the garrison restricted him to, and there burst into a guffaw that straightway brought Mr. Royce from the adjoining apartment, who joined in the shout of laughter as soon as he heard its cause. But Hollis went drearily to his own quarters. Things were taking a turn he little dreamed of.

Meantime, the colonel was sitting silently at his desk, conning over the list the adjutant had set before him. At last he stretched forth his hand for the telegram, looked it over once more, then spoke.

"Strictly, I suppose, Mr. Royce or Mr. Webster should go; neither has yet had a tour of detached duty; but, on the other hand, they have only recently come in from that country, and it isn't fair to send them right back so long as we have any one else. It lies between Hollis and Corry," he finished, decisively, "and you may tell Mr. Hollis to get ready at once."

"Very well, sir. And the detachment?"

"From Gregg's troop. Fifteen men will do. Let them take five day's rations from here. They can get what more they want at Fetterman, and then at the cantonment."

"I don't see why the other posts could not better have sent out the party," said the adjutant, after a moment's silence.

"Nor do I; but as things are going," added the colonel, slowly, "I think perhaps it is just as well. It will take him away for a month."

The adjutant grinned. "I fear the dramatic associa-

tion will be sorely afflicted, sir. Mr. Hollis had cast himself for the part of the lover in the play they are about rehearsing."

"So I had heard," was the slow reply. And the colonel's moustache was twitching a trifle in sympathy with the corners of his mouth. "I think but for that circumstance we might have given Mr. Corry a chance to distinguish himself. No, sir," he continued, rising with quick, decided movement, "Mr. Hollis goes."

And when the ladies began to appear at the late breakfast tables along the row, guard-mount was long over, and the news was flitting from house to house that the leader of last night's german was ordered off on some sudden duty the nature of which was not thoroughly understood, and Mrs. Turner, who had not forgiven his defection of the wee sma' hours that morning, was ready with her inference and conclusions.

CHAPTER VIII.

"HORACE, what do you think Mina says?"

Captain Turner was intrenched behind the morning paper,—that mortal enemy to conjugal confabs. Already had his helpmeet begun to assail him with question and theory as to this sudden detail of Gregg's second lieutenant; and, as was his habit when thus attacked, he had retired behind the columns of *The Leader*. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and he was hungry, poor fellow, for, except the cup of coffee his "striker" had made for him at dawn, not a morsel had passed his lips. The cook had long since offered to bring his breakfast, but he declined, preferring to wait until his wife had slept her fill. She came down at last, languid, sleepy-eyed, with cheeks bereft of the bloom that usually decked them,—the pink roses had changed their hue to yellow,—with dark circles under her eyes, with tousled hair and a morning-gown that ill became her; and she had fled precipitately to the kitchen when Mr. Corry suddenly came into the little army parlor to see his captain on some immediate business. She had paraded that young officer about for nearly a month as a new conquest when he first reported in the fall, but already he had outgrown his leading-strings, and was one of "Mrs. Turner's graduates" in much less than the usual course. Corry dis-

posed of, the captain had waited some minutes longer for breakfast, listening to a Babel of voices in animated colloquy in the kitchen, and at last had ventured to ring the bell. He hated these kitchen gatherings. In the easy-going methods of the frontier it was so handy for Mrs. Freeman's cook to trot in through the hole in the fence to borrow a cupful of sugar, or Mrs. Billings's Ethiopian maid to beg a pat of butter, or Mrs. Heath's "striker" to ask the loan of the skillet—"their's was busted," and one and all to spend five minutes or so in making partial payment by the tender of such news or gossip as might have come to them. Many a time, as Turner well knew, the alleged object of the errand was a shallow pretence, a mere cover for the mad desire to be the first to tell some lively piece of scandal. And time and again had he remonstrated with his pretty but petulant spouse to no effect beyond throwing her into a passion of tears and reproaches, and a plea to be sent home to her own people where she was not being perpetually nagged for things she could not prevent. "How can I help their coming here and talking?" she indignantly demanded. "You wouldn't have me order them off the premises, would you?" Turner mildly replied that he thought she could at least refuse to listen to these yarns, either from their lips or by transmission through those of her own kitchen goddess. But it always ended in his defeat and his going gloomily off to his troop or to the store—that refuge of martial-marital woe—feeling sure that his view was the right one, yet helpless in his effort to suppress this long-established back-door "bureau of information." As for Mrs. Turner, she was too volatile to long remember

either his wishes or her own woe. The days were few when she had not some new gossip to bubble over, and, being unable to think of anything else, could not wait to meet her cronies, but had to try its effect on him. It was this that always drove him behind his paper. There was no answer to her question.

"Horace," she called again. "Do put down that stupid paper a minute." (It was the winter when for weeks we knew not which party would seat its president; when civil war, confusion, and anarchy were staring us in the face, and no man could tell what the day might bring forth.) The captain lay down the details of the exciting debate in the House and strove to come back to the affairs of his daily life.

"What do you suppose Mina says?"

"Mina who?"

"Why," with a pout, "Mina next door. You know perfectly well who I mean."

"How should I know what Mina says?" he asked, gravely.

"Well, you might at least try and be interested in things that are so interesting to everybody else. I must tell you, if I can't other people."

Turner sighed.

"Don't you think you might find something a little more worthy your attention, Fanny?" he asked, sadly. "I do not know what Mina has to say now. I do not want to know, for she has brought more scandal and gossip into this house than any two women along the back yards in this post." He came dangerously near saying something about those of the front yards as well, but checked himself in time.

"I declare, Captain Turner, you just make me wish I'd never been born, sometimes, with all these superior airs and morals. I can't help it if people come and tell me things. I must have something to think about? And since you won't talk to me, what can I do?"

She had him there, poor fellow, and yet it was no fault of his. There was no subject under the canopy of heaven that he knew anything about that afforded her the faintest entertainment. She yawned and looked bored at his best efforts, yet would be all animation in an instant when other men came in—or other women were under discussion.

"Well," he asked, resignedly, "what does Mina say?"

"Well, you know her sister worked at Major Granger's before she went to live at Mrs. Pond's in town?"

"I confess I did not," said the captain. "In fact, I don't remember ever having heard of her sister before."

"Well, she did; and she was with them until Mrs. Granger went East, and she says that Mrs. Granger promised to take her back as soon as she returned from the sea-shore, and so she only took this place at Mrs. Pond's for the time being, and yet when Mrs. Granger came she brought new servants with her, and wouldn't have Annie at all. Wasn't it mean?"

"There may have been some reason which we know nothing about."

"Mrs. Granger would have been wise not to have turned her off in that way. Mina says Annie told her all sorts of things. She says that one night, just

before they went East, Mr. Hollis was there in the parlor, and Major Granger came back from town in a rage and ordered him out of the house, and swore he'd shoot him if he ever came again, and after he'd gone there was an awful scene between him and her. She declared she would never forgive him for such an insult; said she'd go back home at once, and then he told her if she did he'd publish some letters he had of her's, and she dared him to, called him a coward and a thief, and then he lost all control of himself and beat her, and she screamed for help, and he tried to gag her. Why, it was perfectly awful! Think of it, Horace." For the captain was sitting there with an absolutely and exasperatingly wooden expression on his face; and when Mrs. Turner found him thus unmoved by the first presentation of her story, it was her habit to go over its salient details again, accenting every other word.

"Think! *beat* her till she *scur-reamed* for help, and he *gagged* her. Wasn't it *awful*, Horace? And all on Mr. Hollis's account."

"Awful, yes,—as a piece of mendacity. I don't believe a word of it."

"Well, I do; because—I'll tell you," exclaimed Mrs. Turner, waxing forgetful in her anxiety to score a point. "Mina says she went there last week to call on Mrs. Granger's Martha, the new girl, and they're from the same town in the old country, and Martha said if she had known what sort of people she was going to live with she'd never have come out with Mrs. Granger in the world—no matter what wages she offered. The major was always spying about in her

trunks and desk when she was out; and they quarrelled fearfully, and he often struck her, and then they wouldn't speak for days, and then he'd come in and cry and beg her pardon and swear he loved her to madness and was jealous of every man who looked at her. Oh, I believe it.—Don't you?"

"I believe this, Fanny, as I have told you, God knows how often before," said the captain, solemnly, "that it is utterly unbecoming in you or any lady to permit servants to come to you with such infamous stories. You permit my house to be the rendezvous of these wretched tale-bearers despite all I have said and urged."

"Captain Turner, I think you're too outrageous for anything," protested the lady, springing from the table, her cheeks aflame, her eyes blazing. "I'd like to know how I'm to prevent people from talking if they want to. *I* don't ask them here, as you seem to think. *I* don't want them to come. They just come and then you declare I invite them; that I herd with servants and live on their scandals, and I've no doubt you think I'm responsible for half the things that are said around the garrison this very minute." (I fear me that if the captain were cross-examined on that point he would have to plead guilty.) "You blame me for everything —*every*thing. Oh, dear—oh, dear, I wish——" And here Mrs. Turner threw herself on the parlor sofa and wept and rocked herself to and fro in plaintive misery. Turner arose and walked slowly up and down the dimly-lighted room, for the shades were not yet raised.

"I do not accuse you as you say, my child," he sadly spoke, "but I do hold that you have no business what-

ever to go to your kitchen and listen to these poor creatures——"

"No," she interrupted, "I know I've no right in my own kitchen or anywhere else," sobbed Mrs. Turner, in withering sarcasm. "I go there simply to see that your coffee is right and your breakfast prepared, and for all this I'm lectured like a common felon."

"Breakfast had been waiting an hour before you came, Fanny," was Turner's answer. "Jane had been in three times to say it was spoiling. You darted out there to avoid being seen by Mr. Corry and never came back until I had rung twice. You were there over ten minutes by the clock, and your voice was quite as audible as the others." He had more to add, but such an array of evidence no right-minded woman could be expected to listen to. Suddenly reminded of these forgotten particulars, Mrs. Turner sprang from the sofa and rushed, sobbing, to the sanctity of her own apartment, having time for only one arrow before she vehemently locked and bolted the door:

"God pity me! And this is the man who swore to love and protect—Oh, me! Oh, me!"

Turner left his breakfast unfinished and went forth, sighing heavily. Just a door or two beyond, Mrs. Truscott, looking as bonny and blithe as a peach-blossom, was tucking baby Jack into his little carriage, the captain bending over his son and heir and tickling him into one of those toothless smiles that bring such bliss and sunshine into parental hearts, and then the nursemaid trundled the tiny soldier-boy away, and Grace linked her hands about her husband's arm and they stood there together a moment, looking after that

diminutive entity with eyes that plainly told their story of love and joy and hope unutterable; and Turner stopped short at the gate. He had nowhere in particular to go,—no duty to call him forth. It was too cold for drill and Mr. Corry was with the troop at horse exercise. Mrs. Truscott caught sight of him, and nodded and smiled brightly, and Turner mechanically raised his cap and stood watching her, as, after a final long gaze towards the glistening white baby-carriage, she turned back to the open door-way, and, clinging fondly to her husband's arm, and gazing joyously up into his face, drew him back to their cheery fireside. A lump rose in Turner's throat and a film covered his tired eyes. He glanced one instant at the dormer window on the second floor, where the curtains were still drawn, and at the parlor windows where the shades still shut out all view of the interior. He glanced back towards the rear of the house, where the sound of shrill voices caught his ear, and where "Mina next door" was still gabbling over the fence to his cook. He saw the firelight dancing in the hearth through the white lace curtains that hung at the windows of his comrade's home,—the other half of the brown, clapboarded cottage,—but there was no light, no light of any kind in his. He turned slowly, drearily down the road. There stood the store at the gate-way. It was better, at least, than nothing.

Meantime, the colonel was fuming at head-quarters. It was now after eleven o'clock. For thirty minutes a detachment of troopers had been standing in the open space back of the office stamping their feet on the frozen ground and impatiently awaiting the word to

mount and be off. In fur caps, gloves, and buffalo overshoes, their nether limbs incased in Indian leggings, the collars of their big overcoats turned up about their ears, their saddles packed with blanket, haversack, and canteen, their carbines slung from the broad black belt, the revolvers peeping from the leathern holsters; everything in their guise indicated preparation for a long march northward into the teeth of the wintry blizzards that swept the wild plains beyond the Platte. In vain had messenger after messenger been sent for Mr. Hollis. He had not been found.

"You are sure you ordered him to start at 10.30," said the colonel to Mr. Billings for the third or fourth time.

"Perfectly, sir."

The colonel took a turn or two up and down the office. "And yet Captain Gregg tells me he rode away at nine o'clock in the direction of town. Is all Mr. Hollis's baggage in the wagon, sergeant?"

"Everything, sir. We loaded up at the lieutenant's quarters before he rode away."

"Then mount your detachment and march on to Lodge Pole. Keep the main road. Mr. Hollis will overtake you." And, glad to be off, the sergeant saluted and hurried out to his men. The colonel, with righteous indignation in his face, returned to his desk.

It was high noon and the trumpet was pealing mess- and orderly-call when poor Tommy came galloping into the post, followed by two of the three couriers sent in search of him. Obedient to his orders and with sorely flustered spirit, he hastened to the adjutant's office and was dismounting when the colonel appeared on the porch.

"Never mind dismounting, sir. Keep your saddle. You have lost an hour and a half already, for your command marched long ago. Now, are you ready, or have you still matters to attend to?"

"I'm all ready, colonel. I declare I'd no idea I was so late. I hurried all——"

"Never mind details, Mr. Hollis. You are ready, you say. Then start at once; follow the trail of your men and don't quit it till you overtake them." And with this the chief whirled about and plunged into his sanctum; and, in mingled relief and wretchedness, Tommy clucked to his steaming horse and trotted around to the rear of the office, then, striking a lope, rode steadily away across the open, rolling prairie towards the cold, distant ridge-line at the north. It was by no means the march forth he had pictured himself, as making down the length of officer's row, with all the ladies waving him good-by. It was an ignominious exit at best, but he had escaped the terrible rasping he well knew he had deserved, and the colonel had not even asked him where and how he had been so long detained. Mrs. Atherton was just coming forth into the keen, frosty air to try the bracing effect of a stroll in the radiant sunshine, and a chat with some of her friends, as Hollis vanished. One of the messengers threw his horse's reins over the rail across the row and, saluting her as he would an officer,—a fashion many of the men had fallen into,—handed her a letter.

"Oh! Was Mrs. Granger well enough to write?" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad. Thank you, Burns. I did not expect an answer for half an hour yet. You must have ridden hard."

"I did, ma'am. The colonel sent me there full gallop, with orders to find Mr. Hollis, and we came back the same way."

"Oh! Was Mr. Hollis there?"

"Yes, ma'am, he was at Major Granger's, and——" But Mrs. Atherton was already busy reading her letter, and had turned away, walking slowly down the path.

"How sweet of you, dear Mrs. Atherton, to write to me so early and kindly. Do not worry; I am quite myself this morning, and only miserable that I should have lost so much of that loveliest of germans,—and all for nothing. There has been no robbery of any consequence, such as you feared, and, indeed, I did at first when I saw my ransacked sealskin, and that slit in the canvas. Very possibly the thief was interrupted, for the porte-monnaie I thought was gone, and which contained some valuable papers, was safe in the inner pocket. All he took was a roll of small bills, and that was doubtless his only object. These absurd fainting spells have come upon me in the most unaccountable way of late, and I feel that I owe you all an apology for having so abominably disturbed the harmony of your lovely party. Do forgive me, and with my love and thanks to you and all who so kindly inquired, I am

"Sincerely yours,

"MADELEINE GRANGER.

"P.S.—May I burden you with this little note for Mr. Blake. Major Granger says the orderly is waiting."

"This little note for Mr. Blake," quoth her ladyship, reflectively, "is somewhat bulkier than mine. Oh! Mr. Billings!" she called, as the adjutant came spinning along in his usual hurry. "Just give this to Mr. Blake, will you? I'm going in to see Mrs. Gregg." And Billings accordingly banged in at Blake's door; finding that gentleman seated at the centre-table, the bandage still over his eye, puffing away at a brier-root pipe, while Ray was busy writing at the desk.

"What ho! my wingéd mercury. Speak from thy lungs military, bully knight, and say what hast thou," shouted Blake, closing the book on his lap with sudden snap.

"Note for you from Mrs. Atherton. How are you, old man?" asked the adjutant, tossing the missive on the table.

"Leave off discourse of disability. I'm fit for—*Hell!*" The note went spinning from his fingers, projected by a nervous jerk,—a quick, convulsive shudder that seemed to shoot through every nerve,—the instant he caught sight of the superscription of the billet he had begun so idly to turn over. He sprang from his chair and caught it at the hearth, then stowed it with twitching hands in an inner pocket of his blouse, turning his back upon his friends.

"Well, that's about as frank a confession as I've heard in a year, Legs," drawled Ray, turning slowly in his chair. "Why! what's amiss, man?" he added, with total change of tone, as he quickly left his seat. And then it suddenly dawned on Mr. Billings that there was something there he was not a party to.

Very probably they never heard his abrupt good-day, or noted his departure.

Nannie Bryan, with her two new girl-friends, was strolling up the walk as he hurried out, and she looked wistfully into his face while Amy Waldron asked how Mr. Blake was getting on. Turner, too, happened along at the moment, coming back from the store sorrowing over the distressing interview with his wife, and bent on going in to comfort her and make up; but even as he stopped a moment to speak to the adjutant a door opened up the row; gay, laughing voices were heard in animated chat, Messrs. Dana and Royce came forth, Mrs. Turner following them to the porch; every trace of tears utterly gone, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks glowing, mirth and merriment bubbling from her lips. Turner could hardly believe it the same woman whom he had left an hour agone, plunged in woe and lamentation; but even now he hardly realized the extent of her recuperative power. She had no more felt all she expressed—than she had told him all that Mina next door had revealed.

And presently Ray came out into the sunshine and went on up towards Truscott's, giving only an absent nod to his friends at Turner's gate, and Blake at last was left alone. He went up into his bed-room, locked and bolted his door,—a thing he never had done before,—then seated himself by the window and drew forth the little note which had so nearly fallen into the fire. Full five minutes he studied the superscription, turning over the dainty missive again and again in his long, slender fingers. At last, though with an effort, he opened and read.

"GERALD,—

"If you dream what I have perilled,—if you but half suspected what I am daring now for your sake, you could not find it in your heart to treat me with scorn and contempt. I do not plead for forgiveness. I know I wronged you beyond all hope of that; but you are revenged, for my misery has been complete for years. Ever since your hideous welcome to my roof that night, I have felt that I must see and talk with you, and yesterday I wrote to you, imploringly, telling you what I dare not say again. You have heard of the robbery at the ball. *That letter was the only thing taken*, and the thief—O God, that such disgrace should come to me!—was my husband. There is nothing of which he has not accused me since my return from the East. Gerald, it is a heart-broken woman that appeals to you—not for forgiveness; I dare not ask that; but for mercy. We must meet—we shall meet; and when we do, in pity for my suffering, be gentle to me. Some day I will tell you all. Till then, do not judge me too harshly.

"MADELEINE."

People sometimes compare notes in this world. If Mrs. Atherton and Mr. Blake had but compared these two that came in the one enclosure, very much that afterwards happened might have been avoided. But of course Mr. Gerald Blake never thought of such a thing. On the contrary, he took from a worn old leather writing-case another letter,—a worn old letter it was, too; blurred and stained with marks that were

not those of time alone; and this he pored over before, an hour later, he locked them both in that weather-beaten portfolio, stowed it in his trunk, and presently buried his bruised head in his arms and sat there in his dreary room, thinking of by-gone days,—mourning a by-gone love.

CHAPTER IX.

It was one of those rare late winter days that sometimes dawn upon the eastern slopes of the Rockies. The frosty air was full of ozone, stimulant, and sparkle, and so still and serene that the smoke from every chimney sailed slowly aloft, straight towards the zenith. The sunshine poured down from an unclouded sky, warm, rich, and mellow. The prairie roads were hard and beaten. The prairie sward glistened and glinted with innumerable tiny globules where the sharp touch of the night frosts had fringed every little blade of bunch-grass. Thin, brittle sheets of ice overspread the little pools, where the dancing waters of the *acequia* had been checked in their rapid flow; and under every pole of the military telegraph line a musical hum, like that of some huge single-stringed æolian harp, fell upon the ear. Far to the south the lofty peaks gleamed and shimmered in the radiant sunshine, like huge broad-based cones of purest loaf-sugar; and over to the west the sharp ridge-line of the great divide seemed but half a dozen miles away,—though it could not be reached in a long day's march. Except among the heavier clumps of grass and along the trench of the irrigating ditches the snow had made no lodgement, and the prairie, in its snug-fitting jacket of gray-green bunch-grass, lay hard and frozen as the solid ice in the

shallow reaches of the stream that came chattering down over its stony bed, cold and repellent as an Arctic river. Out on the level flats towards the distant town several teams, the Laramie stage, and an ambulance or two bowled briskly along, the horses tossing their heads and capering in sheer enjoyment of so blithe a morning, and up the hard-beaten trail from the depot Mrs. Granger's landau flashed into view, just as the various troops of the —th, with fluttering guidons and glistening sabres came dancing up the slopes from the stables in the valley,—the men simply could not make their horses walk on such a day,—and adjutant's call rang out from the squad of trumpeters stationed in front of the old brown hospital. "In such glorious, faultless weather," said the colonel, "horses and men would be all the better for a brisk battalion drill." Fingers and noses might suffer a trifle at first, but the exercise would soon send the blood bounding through the veins and make it joy to be in saddle. And he was right. Presently, in long extended rank, the six troops were drawn up in line of battle, the sabres flashed their salute to the commanding officer, and before many minutes a dozen ladies from the garrison were clustered along the walk in front of the store, and, while a few gathered about Mrs. Granger's carriage, others walked briskly up and down for warmth and exercise, and all watched with eager interest the rapid manœuvres of the battalion, heralded by stirring trumpet calls. Mrs. Granger had a friend with her, a Mrs. Morris, from town, and Mrs. Morris was the wife of one of the prominent capitalists of Cheyenne, and a woman eager, as was evident, to make a pleasant

impression on those recognized queens of frontier society, the ladies of the —th. Most of them knew her, of course. She had called on them all and had attended the famous german with other townsfolk, and was loud in her admiration of the loveliness and grace of these new occupants of the garrison so recently ruled and governed by their predecessors of the Eleventh, whom she had known much better and felt far more at home with. Mrs. Morris was not a pretty woman, but she had a certain pre-eminence among the dames in social circles outside of the post, and was eager to extend her sphere, if possible, to invade the sacred limits of the military bailiwick. She had not hitherto been an intimate of Mrs. Granger's, and women like Mrs. Waldron were surprised to find them driving together. Many of the officers, obedient to orders from Mrs. Atherton and the lady managers, had been attentive to Mrs. Morris as well as to other townspeople, and she had danced—rather bulkily to be sure—with most of their number. The cloud that for a time threatened to fall between Mrs. Granger and the regiment had apparently been lifted, for she was all smiles, graciousness and cordiality on meeting the ladies this lovely morning. It was her first appearance at the post since the night of the german,—and when the colonel saw her afar off he looked but little pleased.

Of course many of the ladies of the —th had been down to call upon and condole with her, but some had denied themselves that luxury, and this was their first sight of Mrs. Granger since that joyous affair which, up to the time of her melodramatic misadventure, had

been so charming a success. Now, it was noted that although they bowed and smiled, and even stopped just a minute to speak to her, one little party thereafter avoided Mrs. Granger, and of that party Mrs. Atherton and Mrs. Stannard were fair specimens. Blithely, with much silvery laughter and a babble of joyful voices, the fun went on. The regiment was trotting about but a short distance away at the moment, and most of the ladies were now paying very little attention to it. It was facing south and in one long line again, when Mrs. Granger was reminded that it was really time for her to start for town; she had promised Mrs. Morris to take her in. Her horses had been pawing and snorting impatiently, and Grimsby, her English driver, was having some difficulty in restraining their eagerness. At last, after much bidding adieu and repeated injunctions to be sure to come down and see her, she gave the signal to start, and the spirited bays whirled away southeastward, passing along in front of the line at a spanking trot which they every moment strove to quicken into a run.

As luck would have it, the colonel at the moment was facing away from the garrison and looking eastward along his extended line. The men had been doing their best, but in that keen, exhilarating air the horses were almost wild with high spirits, and several of their movements at rapid gait had degenerated into impetuous rushes, almost like those of a flock of sheep, which the troop commanders had labored in vain to prevent. Every time the gait was increased to the gallop some luckless troopers, tugging manfully at the reins, would be whisked away by their plunging steeds,

and, to the colonel's intense disgust, half a dozen hard-mouthed chargers at this very moment were dashing about the prairie in big sweeping circles, despite every effort of their riders to restrain them.

Determined to keep at the movement until it was properly executed, Atherton once more addressed a few sharp words of caution to the troop leaders and of reproof to the men, and then ordered "fours right," following it instantly with "left front into line, gallop." The next thing Mrs. Granger knew her progress townward was blocked by several strong troops of blue-coated cavalry, riding diagonally across her path, and sweeping out towards her startled horses at a plunging gallop. Grimsby quickly whirled his team to the right and headed them across the frozen prairie towards the bluff, hoping to pass around the left flank of the long battalion; but, pricking up their ears, prancing and plunging, his horses seemed to see, hear, feel nothing but the coming rush of four-footed fellow-creatures; and then Grimsby, in wrath, made the blunder of snatching out his whip and hitting each horse a sharp cut just as the front wheels struck a little *acequia*. He had risen to his feet, and the start, the jar, the sudden violent swerve were all too much for his balance. Out he went head foremost upon the icy surface, and, released suddenly from the hated restraining reins, with mad bounds away went Mrs. Granger's beautiful team, the landau bounding through space at their clattering heels. "My God! They're going straight for the bluff!" was the cry; and the bluff was not four hundred yards away. Mrs. Morris was heard to lift up her voice in one shrill, ear-piercing

shriek, at sound of which the dashing steeds set back their ears and fled the faster. The groups of ladies along the walk near the store could only wring their hands and gaze in fascination at the terrible sight, but they had hardly time to picture the impending catastrophe, when all chance of it was banished in a cheer.

Freeman was officer of the day, and not on drill,—his troop commanded by his first lieutenant, Mr. Blake,—and, almost before the landau had fairly launched out upon its rush, Blake had put spurs to his charger, thrown aside his sabre, and, leaving the troop to get into line as best it could, "Legs" went tearing after the runaway team, shooting across its track from the rear, and, in big circle, closing in upon the runaway on the "off" side. Almost at the same instant Billy Ray had darted from his place in line—he was commanding Buxton's troop in the protracted absence of that officer—and, with Dandy's heels fairly spurning the frozen earth, had overtaken him and was close to the hind wheels on the "near" side as he shouted,—

"That's right, Blake. Round 'em to the left,—slowly now. Sit still, Mrs. Morris! Don't you dare jump." Another minute, and when they could not have been more than seventy yards from the edge of the bluff that overhung the valley, Blake checked the wild rush of his horse as he passed the reins from the left to his right hand, edged in close to the panting, laboring quadruped,—the "off" horse of Mrs. Granger's team,—and stretched forth his left hand as though to grasp the lines. The maddened beast felt the move and swerved to the left. Blake followed, again leaning

over. Another swerve was the result, and, in this way, in long sweeping circle, the runaways were gradually rounded until, within ten yards of the edge, they were once more heading eastward, parallel with the bluff line, and then Ray's voice was heard, cheery as before, "Now, old man, lay hold." And in another moment four horses were galloping abreast, with Blake and Ray astride of the flankers. Another moment still, and each had grasped the rein nearest him, and then, guiding the team well away from the valley, and over the hard level of the prairie, they gradually brought them down to a choppy canter, then to a trot, and finally, nearing the road, quietly turned into the beaten track back towards the post, where they were presently surrounded with comrades and congratulations. Grimsby, undamaged except as to his hat and raiment, came running down to meet them. The colonel rode up alongside to praise Mrs. Granger for her pluck in sitting still and uttering no cry, inferentially rebuking Mrs. Morris for her insane behavior; and Mr. Royce galloped out from the store with Doctor Pease's injunction not to attempt to raise Mrs. Granger's head until he got there. It seemed to be generally conceded that she must have fainted as a matter of course, but to the surprise of everybody she had done nothing of the kind. Even now, when the danger was all over, and the humbled Grimsby had once more assumed the box and the reins of government, the carriage was made the centre of a group of officers eager to condole with Mrs. Granger on her startling experience and to tender their services to escort her home or into the garrison, which latter course they especially

urged. And presently who should come tearing up the road from the depot, mounted on a whinnying quartermaster's horse, but Granger himself; his eyes wild with apprehension, his spectacles gone, his trousers hitched up half-way to his knees,—a picture of mingled discomfort and dismay. Once more she had all the commissioned force of the —th about her, while the ladies stood looking on from afar, and the situation was by no means unwelcome as she reclined, most gracefully, properly agitated, pressing her hand to her palpitating heart and smiling sweetly, faintly around upon them. She could have borne it indefinitely perhaps, but the major, hurriedly, almost incoherently thanking the officers for their sympathy, ordered Grimsby to drive homeward.

"Not until I have thanked the gentlemen who rescued us," she promptly declared, as she peered eagerly about among the cavaliers on either side.

"I'll attend to all that, my dear," protested Granger; "but I know what is best for you. Drive back, Grimsby. Whom have I to thank for this great service?" he asked.

"Mr. Blake and Mr. Ray, major," was the cool reply of the colonel; "and they don't seem to be here." Indeed, no sooner was Grimsby back on his perch and the carriage surrounded by their comrades than those two gentlemen had quietly trotted away to their respective troops. Granger's face was a picture that would have been hard to paint at this announcement.

"I must ask you then," he stammered, "to make temporary acknowledgment, as I cannot leave my wife; she is not strong, and this——" But he broke off

abruptly, with blue, quivering lips, and clattered after the carriage.

"You may dismiss your troops, gentlemen," said the colonel; "drill is over. Come to the office, Mr. Billings."

Two days afterwards, as Mr. Ray was sitting on a garrison court, the orderly trumpeter popped in with the mail. Two letters with feminine superscription were handed him, one of which he stowed away in the breast of his coat, the other he opened and idly read.

"What does this mean, Blakey," he asked, an hour later, when he bolted into the sitting-room which he and his faithful chum enjoyed in common. "'Mrs. Morris will be happy to welcome Lieutenant Ray at luncheon to-morrow at one o'clock. Very informally.' I suppose you have a similar bid. I've never called there and I don't know Morris at all. He has never shown any desire to meet either of us, and we've been here longer than any of the men except Hollis."

"Well, Hollis went there a great deal. I suppose it is very natural she should want to meet you after your pulling her out of a prospective smash-up," said Blake, turning away as he spoke.

"Nothing more was necessary than that Morris himself should write a line. He hasn't done that, though Granger has, poor devil!"

"Morris couldn't; he isn't home;—went to Omaha several days ago, but returns to-morrow."

"How did you hear?" asked Ray. "Oh, never mind——" he broke off suddenly. "Is anybody else asked? It seems sort of queer,—just you and me bidden to lunch. I suppose she'll have some one to

meet us, for Hollis says no one is visiting her. He called there last night with Royce, and they're not invited."

"I suppose she will," was Blake's brief reply. "Then you'll go?"

"Why, I'd rather not, Blake. I don't care to visit women whose husbands don't care to meet me."

"He hasn't had a chance, Ray, since the runaway."

"He had a hundred before it, anyhow, and as so many of the prominent men took the trouble to come out and call after last summer's affair, his failure to do so was remarked. Another thing, Blake," and now Ray spoke with a hesitancy very foreign to his nature; "Is it not likely that if she asks anybody it will be —Mrs. Granger?"

There was a moment's silence. Blake had made his way over to the window, and was leaning against the casement and gazing out upon the wind-swept parade. A light, powdery snow was driving before the blast, for rare indeed were the wintry days when the mountain pass to the west failed to send its blustering compliments by the time the sun was at the zenith. The only light in the barrack-like apartment came through those front windows, and even this was tempered by the overhanging roof of the porch in front. Ray stood in the gloom, Blake's tall figure in sharp relief, but his face was hidden. Presently the answer came,—

"Mrs. Granger has been asked, Billy, and says she will not go. But suppose she could, what then?"

"Simply this: after our quarrel with Granger, I think we would have no business there."

"Not after what he has written?"

"No! Not by a Kentucky jugful. See here, old man, the Lord knows I hate to say a word that may sound unkind to a fellow who has stood by me through thick and thin as you have,—I wouldn't do it, Blakey, if I didn't think so d—d much of you." (As usual, when among his kind and deeply moved, Mr. Ray fell back on the characteristic vernacular.) "I've no idea of diplomacy. I can't beat round the bush; but my opinion is just this: Granger called on every officer of the regiment except you and me. He never came near us last summer, though he was often here in the post. The night you sought his quarters to get help for old Bryan you were knocked senseless at his very door, and you had reason to think him responsible for the assault. So far from sending a courteous reply to your letter, he insults you; says you perfectly well knew he could have nothing to do with the matter, because he was absent at the time,—otherwise you wouldn't have presumed to visit his house. It is as blackguardly an affront as I ever heard of; and when I call upon him for the only reparation possible, he threatens us with charges of provoking a duel; then he comes here and attempts to see you, and I head him off and, with Truscott for a witness, tell him in the language of the church catechism that he is a thief and a liar. You know perfectly well that no tongue in all this neighborhood was so virulent against us last summer as his. You know that he is the fountain-spring of every bit of mean scandal concerning any officer that is put in circulation hereabouts. You know perfectly well that, when our fellows got back from the long, hard campaign, and those farewell dinners

were given in town, and there *was* a good deal of fun and frolic, it was that fellow who came up here to Atherton, and went to the general's staff and to the general himself, I'm told, and filled their ears with everything he had heard about one man after another. You know well that he never comes out to this post but that he has something discreditable to tell of somebody or other from Sanders, Laramie, Sidney, or Fetterman whom he has seen at train-time in town. You know well that it was his evidence and persecution that drove poor Moulton out of the service, and that he started the row that killed Jimmy Cramer right here at this post. You know well that half those Black Hills outfits are supplied with odds and ends of government stores that never were bought at public auction. Ask any one of those men where he got those things, and he will grin and wink, and stick his tongue in his cheek. They are sold by Granger's people and Granger knows it, and it was because Moulton knew it and Cramer was catching on that he downed them. He has wealth and influence. He has a dozen men in his employ who will swear to anything he tells them, no doubt; but, all the same, he's an unmitigated cad. He had to write that letter to you after the runaway. He's smart enough to know that public sentiment would be hard against him if he didn't,—he begs you to accept his best thanks for so inestimable a service and to let by-gones be by-gones, but what does it amount to? Does he explain the assault? Does he retract or apologize for the insult in the other note? Not a bit of it! There's only one way in which you and I can meet him, Blakey, and you know it."

"I'm not talking about him."

Another silence. Ray began pacing the floor, then suddenly turned and laid his hand on Blake's shoulder. "Legs, its none of my business, perhaps, but, if you care anything for that—for her—yet, it's only harming her good name to meet her when you won't recognize her husband. It's only harming yourself to meet her at all." And then Mr. Ray took his forage-cap and went over to Truscott's, leaving Blake still at the window.

Yes, another note had come from her as Ray supposed, and this Blake read again,—

"And now I owe you my very life, and yet you avoid me. Gerald Blake, do not crush a heart-broken woman. If I asked anything more than a kind word, one kind look, I would not blame you for holding aloof. I know your sense of honor. I know that it is his insane jealousy and his cowardly conduct that make you treat him with contempt. Do you think I do not know him ten times better—and for ten times worse?

"Gerald, as God is my judge, I felt no terror with death staring me in the face, I almost welcomed it. You saved me. You,—the hero of my girlhood,—but I will not offend you further. Now listen. I write hurriedly, wildly, incoherently, perhaps, but I have thought this matter out. Remember, for all the past, for all the wrong I did you,—I ask no forgiveness. Long ago I knew that what fate had robbed me of—your love—could never be regained. Now, at the risk of your misunderstanding me, at the risk of your contempt, I say that your conduct is torture to me. You

are a man, strong and self-reliant; I am a weak, stricken woman, begging only for mercy, begging that I may not be driven to despair by the contempt of the only man who ever held a place in my heart. All I ask is that when we meet in society we meet as friends. People now suppose that it is because of some quarrel with Major Granger you avoid his wife, but he has promised to write to you, begging your forgiveness for his insane language, and asking that you give him at least a semblance of friendship. This done,—*and he shall do it*,—you cannot, you surely cannot, find it in your heart to publicly scorn me. Upbraid me,—curse me if you will, Gerald, but for God's sake do not shun me. Let us meet as friends. I swear I will not meet you otherwise.

"Mrs. Morris invites me to luncheon with you and Mr. Ray. Mr. Morris is hurrying home, and her mother will be there; but Gerald, I know you so well that I feel you will not accept if you think I am to be present; and to-day I write to her declining because I am still so weak and shaken. Is not this proof that I mean to regard your wishes? The bearer will call for an answer to-night. You may trust him implicitly. Unless you mean to drive me to despair, write me one little word in kindness.

"MADELEINE."

For an hour after Ray left the room Mr. Blake sat there deep in thought. Then stable-call sounded, and he shook himself together. Ray came whistling in with the gale, blithe and cheery, his face full of sunshine, yet sprinkled with flakes of snow.

"Going to stables, old man?" he cried. "Come on."

"One moment, Billy. Did you tell Truscott about the invitation?"

"Yes. I wanted his opinion,—for my own benefit, Blake," was the reply, in much more solemn tone.

"What did he say?"

"He says it would pain the Morrises very much if we did not go, and they are people who deserve every consideration; and—after what you tell me about Mrs. Granger's declining—there seems no reason against it, and I've simply *got* to go. Here's a note from Morris himself, from Omaha. It seems he knew my sister and Rallston,—read it."

And Blake read. It was a business-man's note, brief, pointed, yet full of earnest gratitude and a hope he had of meeting them under his own roof. Blake returned it silently.

"Then I suppose we go," was all he said.

That evening Ray begged him to come and call on somebody and get out of himself for a while; but Blake declined. He had something to attend to, he said, and yet, when first call sounded for tattoo and Ray popped in a moment to see what his chum was about, he found him smoking his brier-root pipe and doing practically nothing. At this moment Hogan came in from the rear room.

"There's a man out at the back gate, sorr; says he's come for a note from the lootenant."

"Who is it?" asked Blake, shortly.

"I can't see him, sorr. He's all bundled up in fur; but it's wan of the depot horses he's ridin', and he talks like a cockney."

"Tell him there is no answer."

Hogan vanished. Blake turned sharply away and went out into the hall. Ray, looking anxiously after him, saw as he passed under the hall lamp how white and set his face was. Presently, in again came Hogan.

"The man says there's a mistake, and could he spake with the lootenant?"

"I suppose he could if he came in," said Ray. "How is it, Blake?" he called.

And Blake's voice came back from the hall,—

"There is no mistake whatever, and there is no answer."

When Ray went out for his overcoat and for the little hurricane lamp he always carried at night roll-calls, just as the trumpets began to sound the march down the line, he took Blake's long, thin fingers in his strong grasp, gave the limp hand a vigorous squeeze, and then burst forth into the wintry night without a word.

On the following day the two officers sat in Morris's spacious parlor, listening with such patience as was possible to the voluble assurances of the lady of the house that never, never would she or Mr. Morris forget their heroism or cease to praise their skill. Her mother, a sedate old lady, mercifully deaf, was brought in and presently Morris himself appeared, having just rushed up from the railway-station, saying he could not let even urgent business prevent his hastening to grasp their hands and expressing his heart-felt appreciation of what they had done for him and his.

"I must be at the bank in half an hour," he said,

as he wrung their hands and looked at his wife. "Isn't lunch ready?"

"It will be in one minute," was the answer. And before the minute was over the hall-door was opened and Madeleine Granger, beaming with smiles, cordiality, and unaffected delight, swept forward,—a vision of queenly grace and beauty,—greeted her hostess with brief, joyous words, then turned suddenly on Blake, both her white, jewelled hands extended,—frankness, gladness, laughing triumph illumining her exquisite face.

"Ah, Sir Galahad! Have I caught you at last,—you and Mr. Ray? Now, can I not tell you how heartily I thank you?"

CHAPTER X.

MRS. FREEMAN was seated in her cosey parlor, a work-basket at one side and a cutting-table on the other. That there should be anything incongruous in the use of the state apartment of the little army home for such purposes never troubled her bonny head a particle. There were only two sleeping-rooms aloft, the children's and her own. There were only two rooms on the ground floor in the house proper,—the parlor and the dining-room. The kitchen was in an annex to the cottage. The servants' room in an annex to the kitchen. The coal-shed, wood-shed, the trunk- and box-sheds were annexes to the servants' quarters, and the cow-shed was an annex attached impartially to the rearmost end of the trunk-room and to the inner side of the high fence of rough, unpainted, weather-warped boarding that separated the premises from the bleak wastes of prairie that stretched far away northward. The big frontier fort was not yet ten years of age. It had been built at fabulous expense of the cheapest possible materials. Its diamond-shaped parade had been enclosed on the two adjacent western sides by double cottages for officers' quarters with an imposing pine edifice at the apex for the abode of the colonel commanding. In the days when most of the commissioned force were bachelors, either by actual

right and the mercy of Providence, or by brevet and the force of circumstances, it made little difference that four lieutenants were sometimes crammed into quarters intended only for one; but when wives and children began to come, it made a good deal. Then the limited appropriation vouchsafed by an omniscient Congress was strained to the uttermost farthing to eke out a shelter for the lambs thus driven to refuge within garrison limits, and makeshifts of every buildable description were tacked on the rear elevations of the brown cottages: "linters" on the flanks of those intended for officers of higher rank; "linters" to the kitchen annexes, and ramshackle sheds, of every possible shape but shapely, to the sheds already spiked to the main establishment,—nails would not have held against the Cheyenne zephyr. Like those interminable structures children sometimes build with cards, there really was a substantial framework to one portion, the original nucleus of the pile, but all the rest was shanty. Man after man the successive commanding officers had striven to effect some degree of improvement and uniformity in the back yards of the garrison, but found that there was a sight even more pitiable to be encountered first, and that was the bill of particulars of the appropriation for repairs of quarters at Fort Russell. Man after man the successive post quartermasters had yielded to the importunities of the occupants and furnished plank and scantling, spikes and nails; and year after year had this pennywise patchwork been going on, until the result was a veritable architectural crazy quilt minus all that makes the quilt attractive,—its bright variety of color. Nothing on earth was ever

much more unpicturesque than a rear view of the fort. Mr. Blake, indeed, when righteously exasperated at the conduct of the powers that were in command of the post during the previous summer, had epitomized the situation and perilled his commission by saying that there was only one thing crazier than the head-quarters of Fort Russell, and that was the hind. "And yet," said he, "things are not half as bad behind now as they were before," which was true despite its likeness to Tom Hood, for a vast improvement had been effected in a single night, so far as appearances were concerned, when the cleansing fires of a conflagration had well-nigh obliterated one side of the diamond and reduced the officers' quarters by just a dozen.

And yet people were happy in those quaint old rookeries, now fast vanishing from the face of the earth; were even comfortable so long as the short summer lasted; but when the wintry gales began, threatening to lift the flimsy structures from their iron anchorage, no amount of fuel would keep them warm. All around their bases they were banked with earth, hard rammed and sodded, though the sod refused to sprout. Every knot-hole was plugged. Extra sheets of tar-paper were tacked throughout the interior, and ten thicknesses of the Chicago *Times* were laid beneath the carpets,—the only instance wherein the editorials of that enterprising sheet were ever known to stand between the army and the blasts of adversity. Yet even tar-paper and the *Times* could not prevail against the Wyoming gales, and despite these vaunted barricades the wind still blew where it listed and we heard the sound thereof many a time and oft to the utter exclu-

sion of all bugle-calls, and there was nothing but the still small voice of conscience to warn the martial occupants that reveille and stables were due, and 'twas time to be up and doing.

Now, Mrs. Freeman's bright little parlor was as warm and cosey and cheery as any in the post, yet she sat with her dainty, slippered feet close to the big coal stove that cumbered the room, and a thick India shawl was thrown over her shoulders. Within a radius of six or eight feet of the stove all was warm enough. Beyond that limit the biting wind that forced its way through imperceptible cracks and crannies triumphed over the glowing base burner and the carpet was bulged up in the middle like a segment of some big balloon. The children, delving at their lessons in the dining-room beyond, could not resist the temptation of slipping from their chairs and darting in from time to time and jumping on the huge puff of "Body Brussels" in hopes of hearing an explosion similar to that produced when smashing an inflated paper bag; but the maternal mandate to return instantly to their seats was the only audible result.

A sweet homelike picture she made, this dainty bit of wife and motherhood, as she sat there busy with her needlework, yet keeping watchful eye upon the reluctant students of the other room. The red gold of her wealth of hair was tinged with the fierce glow from the anthracite; the soft bloom on her rounded cheek was deepened by the intense heat of the burning mass. She had a pretty, bird-like way of poising her head on one side and surveying her work at each new turn, and her parted lips—soft and crimson—would

close with an air of womanly decision and her bright head nod sagely as she communed with herself upon the probable effect of the garment she was designing. Once in a while she would glance at the clock, as though impatient for some one's coming. Her husband was on court-martial duty, as she knew, and could not be in before the brief recess at noon, when he usually overhauled the children's slates. Once in a while she turned and glanced over her sloping shoulder to the long curve of the road towards the adjutant's office, as though expecting some one from that quarter. None of the sisterhood were abroad on such a day. Feminine drapery could not stand the buffeting, and locomotion, except to leeward, was impossible. As the Freemans lived near the head of the row and next door to Major Waldron, she could not expect a visitor from below, and Mrs. Waldron had her own brood to teach. Between the colonel's quarters and the head of the bend and their own double cottage was a broad open space through which the gale tore madly, as the quivering fence bore testimony, and, much as Mrs. Atherton wanted to run over to see Mrs. Freeman on this particular morning, she knew she could not make the trip without imminent danger of being blown, like the witches of old, midway 'twixt the shivering earth and the frowning sky.

Yet there was one woman, albeit a very young one, whom Mrs. Freeman confidently expected at ten o'clock, —it was nearly eleven now and she had not come,— and this was Nannie Bryan. One of the children was to have a birthday party within the week. They were all growing fond of "Prairie Nan," as some of them

had laughingly begun to call her, and Mrs. Freeman's early interest in the untaught and motherless girl seemed to have grown with every week. From having been a stranger in the garrison there was now hardly ever a bright day, no matter how cold, when she did not come galloping on her wiry pony into the west gate past the band quarters, and, waving her joyous hail to the officers about the adjutant's office, would spring from the saddle at Freeman's gate and be right lovingly welcomed by the fair young hostess herself. There were a few among the housewives of the —th in those days who were not visible to profane eyes before the noontide bugle; but Mrs. Freeman was not one. When she came singing down to breakfast at guard-mounting every morning, with her sturdy children dancing on before, she was dressed for the day, and every item of her pretty home toilet was as fresh and trim as it could have been for a reception. If the men of the —th had any fault to find, it was that her beautiful hair was almost too carefully arranged,—it looked so bewitching when in partial disarray. Bobby Royce, Freeman's junior subaltern, had once said he would give a month's pay if Freeman's house would only take fire at night,—"Then there might be a chance of seeing Mrs. Freeman with her hair down."

"What can possibly keep Nan?" finally exclaimed the lady of the house, rising from her seat and going to the window, looking first up the road towards the office, then down, as though it were just possible she might have been blown beyond the post. The glance down the line was followed by an almost instantaneous retreat. Somebody was coming who stood not high in

ner good graces; for Mrs. Freeman's sweet face was as frank as the opinions of our nearest friends.

Another moment and the clank of a sabre and the stamp of heavy boots were heard on the cold, creaking piazza, and the snap-bang of the little gong-bell at the door. Ordinarily, when the servants were busy, Mrs. Freeman never hesitated to go thither herself. Now she turned, stepped to the kitchen and called the captain's striker.

"Somebody is at the door, Hansen," she said, in a tone that told volumes to those who knew her. "If he wants to see Captain Freeman, tell him the captain's at the court-room."

But the visitor did not want to see Captain Freeman. In huge fur cap and collar and beaver gauntlets, in the snug-fitting army overcoat worn in those days, in heavy top boots and girt with sabre-belt, his long moustache stiff with frost and his eyelids red with the cold and wind, a tall officer stamped into the hall and thence into the parlor. At sight of him, down went the children's books, and the two rushed upon him, enthusiastically clasping his legs.

"Back to your books, *instantly!* Obey me now," she said, with infinite sternness of mien, as the youngsters looked up amazed and crestfallen. "Do you hear?" she added, with a stamp of the slippered foot; and then with wide-open and reproachful eyes the little ones crept, silent and sorely hurt, away. There was no smile in her eyes as the mother then turned towards, yet not to, her unwanted visitor. She stood bending over her work-basket, never looking at him as she calmly asked,—

"You wished to see the captain, Mr. Blake? Didn't Hansen tell you he was over at the court-room?"

"Not a whit, fair lady. Why, look at your carpet! it would fit a Falstaff. I thought when I helped you nail that down we laid the ghost of every breeze." And Blake took a slide at the wind-swollen mound, never noting the icy manner of his captain's wife,—the woman whom he swore by, as he often said.

"Yes," was her absent reply. "I wonder what's got into it." Almost anything was better than that he should talk of topics nearer home. She had been warned of the purpose of his coming.

"Wind, empty wind," he ranted. "Ah I have it now:

> 'The Times are out of joint. Oh, cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set'——

But who on earth could ever set the Times right? Why! You're looking white and far from well," he cried, with sudden change from his ranting, laughing tone, as he turned and caught sight of her face. "There's nothing wrong, I hope. I just came to ask you to do me a great favor."

"There's nothing wrong with me, Mr. Blake." But the blue eyes looked coldly and calmly into his anxious face. "Is it about the theatricals you wish to see me?"

"Yes. You know that since Hollis had to go I've stepped into his shoes, and all the management falls on my shoulders."

"I have heard of your stepping into his shoes," she answered, with no unnecessary emphasis, yet the tone

brought sudden spasm to his lips and new pain to his smarting eyes. "But you had something to ask of me with regard to the theatricals, Mr. Blake. You know I cannot act."

"I see you cannot," he answered slowly, his face sad and changed. "And now, will you tell me the head and front of mine offending?"

She stood erect at once and looked him fairly in the eyes, though her voice trembled when she began to speak.

"I will. I would not be honest with you if I failed. We have known you longer, my husband and I, than any one else in the regiment. No one was so near to us when we came into the —th as you. Captain Freeman never rested until he secured your transfer to his troop, and you well know how true a friend he is. My children love you. We all had the utmost faith in you. A month ago you must have known what the regiment thought of Mr. Hollis because of his devotions to Mrs. Granger,—you yourself showed plainly your own disapproval,—and yet in this last fortnight you have been her shadow. Everywhere she goes, you go; where she is not invited and you are, you send regrets. While Major Granger was here you met only occasionally; since he was summoned to Omaha, ten days ago, you have been her constant companion, her escort to every affair in town, to both the dances here. Mr. Blake, I cannot recognize as a friend a woman who accepts such attentions in her husband's absence, and I cannot respect a man who tenders them."

She stood there before him, brave, unflinching, like

a little Puritan, though the tears began to gather in her honest eyes. She liked him well, but she was not the woman to shrink from what she deemed the right. She was one of his stanchest friends, but her rule was inflexible. She would uphold one only so long as he or she upheld the right, and when lapsing into wrong-doing, yielding to temptation, one look into the mirror of her lustrous eyes would tell the sinner what that pure heart thought. Bob Royce used to say that when he had been doing that which he ought not to have done, the two women whom he could not bear to meet were his mother and Mrs. Freeman. He spoke of the latter's face as his moral barometer.

For a moment Blake stood in silence, his dark eyes steadfastly regarding those of moistening blue. At last he spoke :

"Mrs. Freeman, you are aware, are you not, that I knew Mrs. Granger long before I knew any one in the —th?"

"Yes, fully, Mr. Blake; but it does not alter my view of the matter."

"And would you have me understand that people are talking of her and of my attentions to her?"

"Mr. Blake, I am not telling you what other people think or say; I am telling you my own opinion."

"Most women fortify their criticisms by ample quotations from what 'everybody says' or 'everybody thinks,'" he rejoined, a bitter smile flickering about the corners of his mouth.

"Oh, you can have anybody else's opinion by asking, I presume; but you asked my reasons simply, and I speak only for myself."

Again there was an instant of silence. Something down in the depths of his heart seemed pleading with him to pour forth the very truth to this pure-minded, fearless woman, and to beg her counsel, her sympathy. His eyes were full of wistfulness and trouble. She saw it,—realized the struggle going on within him, and was touched, yet not one jot nor tittle would she abate of her position. Suddenly there came the sound of a joyous girlish voice without; the outer door flew open, and again the children, who had been straining their ears to catch the barely audible words of the grave colloquy in the parlor, forgot their natural yet innocent curiosity, tumbled with tumultuous welcome into the hall and appeared the next instant hugging Nannie Bryan.

"I couldn't get here before, Mrs. Freeman," laughed the girl. "Beppo broke out of his stall this morning, and was away over the prairie before any one knew it. It took hours to catch him. Good-morning, Mr. Blake," she added, with shy, sudden glance. "I didn't know you were here. Am I very, very late, Mrs. Freeman?"

"Better late than never, Nan. Come right to the stove, child; you must be frozen. Did you ever see such cheeks, Mr. Blake? Look at the glow." And as she spoke her white fingers were unclasping the dingy fur cape and unfastening the strings of the girl's rude riding-cap. Nan's head hung suddenly lower, and the deep flush deepened. But Blake made no answer to the query. Before either the child or her friend and hostess could realize it he had quickly turned and, without one word of farewell, vanished

from the room. The sabre rattled as its scabbard struck against the balustrade in the narrow hall-way. There was a slam of the door, a click of the latch of the little gate in front, and he was gone. Nannie Bryan, stealing a look into Mrs. Freeman's bonny face, saw that her eyes were wet as with recent tears.

"Are you sure I'm not—I'm not going to be in your way this morning, Mrs. Freeman?" she faltered. "I'm afraid you don't feel well."

"Indeed you're not in the way, Nannie. Children, what did I tell you? Go back to your books, and do not dare come to that door again until I call you. Go at once! No, Nan, I've been waiting for you to try this on,—your party dress. But get warm first."

"Oh, I'm not cold. But I thought you looked as though you had been crying."

"I've been scolding Mr. Blake, Nan. It's nothing serious,—nothing you would understand."

But even at the ranch, far up the valley, busy rumor had already been telling the tale. Cowboys who hated Granger; hunters from town who were only too glad of the chance to gossip of the army people; scouts and soldiers out for a lark, had all loosened their tongues at Bryan's bar, and the child had indeed heard much she could not understand, yet that gave her vague and bitter distress. She turned away without a word.

The fire was burning dimly in the big coal-stove as Blake came striding into the sitting-room he and Ray held in common. He hurled off the heavy furs and slung his sabre clattering into the corner. An old cigar-box half filled with smoking tobacco lay at the edge of the centre-table, and a beaver gauntlet struck

and sent it whirling to the floor, scattering the "Lynchburg sun-dried" all over the ragged carpet. He never noted the mishap, never removed his overcoat, but simply unbuttoning it across the chest, flung himself into a big easy-chair, thrust his booted legs to the hearth, threw his head back on the worn and faded cushion, then covered his smarting eyes with long, slim, quivering hands. He was alone and practically free from interruption. Ray was a member of the general court in session up at the adjutant's office. He himself was officer of the day, and not until noon would he be compelled to sally forth again unless something unforeseen occurred. He wanted to think, —needed to think.

And sitting there in the dim light of that lonely room Gerald Blake passed in review the days of his life that had been spent within the sphere of this woman's influence,—the woman on whose account and for whose sake he was losing the friends he had won in the regiment of his choice. Not ten years had he known her, not one had he really spent by her side. They met first at a quiet resort among the Maryland mountains,—she a school-girl attending an invalid aunt; he, just commissioned, devoting to his mother the few weeks of leave accorded to him before going to his regiment. She was but seventeen, and lovely; he but twenty-two, and the only soldier at the Springs. There were other girls there,—lots of them,—and some whom his mother fancied far more than she did Madeleine Torrance; but mothers' fancies in matters of that kind have but little weight. The girl gloried in his quickly-won devotion. It was such a triumph

that she, not yet a *débutante*, should have at her beck and call the tall young officer who begged for dances night after night, who took her to ride day after day or to walk whenever she could slip away from the querulous invalid who claimed so much of her time. Before the short summer was half over he had gone without a look for the other girls, but madly in love with this radiant young beauty. He had been the happiest of men when his commission reached him. All his hope and ambition had been centred in the military service of his country. He had looked forward with absolute impatience to joining his regiment, and with something like actual regret to the few weeks which, as was most natural, his mother expected him to spend with her before going. He was her only boy. He had been much indulged, and, as a boy, had been wild, capricious, yet full of loving impulse. He had inherited some of his father's scholarly tastes, and until the soldier craze overcame him had done fairly well at college. But the chance meeting with some young officers and a visit to Fortress Monroe had done the work. Commissions were not hard to win so soon after the great war. His mother and sisters needed no support from him, for, after years of patient toil among his books, the father had died leaving just the old homestead and a modest competence. Blake's first act after winning his lieutenancy was to make over his little share to them, and now he was free to pursue the career he so ardently sought; yet in less than a fortnight he was fettered by chains that bound his very heart. In June he would have given almost anything to be allowed to go instantly to his new

station. In August he would have given almost anything to stay. In June his mother shuddered at the thought of the coming separation; in July she would eagerly have bidden him go at once. Beautiful as was Madeleine Torrance, well as she was connected, refined and cultured as were her relatives, and brilliant as she herself promised to be, the intuition of the mother was against her the moment she saw how utterly her son was enthralled. Daughter of an old and distinguished officer of the navy who was even then absent with his ship, motherless for several years, she had spent much of her girlhood under the roof of her father's sister, now helplessly invalided, and recently had been attending a fashionable school in New York. Before the school-days she had been not difficult to control; after them she developed a wilfulness that completely baffled the feeble efforts of her protector. Mothers and chaperons of other girls at the Springs said that Madeleine was simply allowed to run wild; that it was scandalous to permit her to dance, walk, ride, as she did always with Gerald Blake. Very possibly the girls said so too, though not a few of their number would eagerly have borne her cross of public disapprobation could they have but worn her crown of triumph. Men were scarce, very scarce, at the Springs, and it was shocking indeed that the one officer should be monopolized by one girl not yet "out." But to everything, to whispered words, to averted looks, to even a gentle mother's gentle warning, Blake was deaf or blind. His was an intense nature. He loved or hated with all his strength, and this radiant girl had won him heart and soul. The last

night at the Springs—O heaven, could he ever forget it!—clinging to his arm she had gone with him to the little summer-house at the cliff, and there with tears, with sobbing protestations, she had sworn that he could not love her more than she loved him; that for life or death she was his forever. Oh, how beautiful she was that perfect August night, with the moonlight bathing her softly-flushing cheek! How exquisite the abandon of her grief as she clung to him in that parting embrace, and gave her warm young lips again and again to his passionate kiss!

Life at a frontier post in those old days was bad enough at best, but when a man had left his heart behind him it was little short of hell. How he lived through that first year of his service Blake never quite understood. Wildly in love, yet perfectly trustful, he was at least shielded from the temptations which beset so many youngsters in the days which followed close upon the war. He wrote to her by the hour, for she had compelled her aunt to agree to that at least, though no engagement was to be recognized for the present. He strove hard to feel an interest in his duties, and he held aloof from all companionship that was not worthy of him or her. He had told his mother all his hopes, all his loves, all his wild joy in the love she gave him in return. "God grant that you may be happy, my son," was all that she could say, but her heart was full of foreboding. Once more the summer came, and once more they met at the Springs, and Blake's heart nearly burst with impatience when, with a month's leave and three months' pay in his pocket, he tore away eastward. Three weeks of heaven were

his,—a happiness such as he had pictured even in his dreams,—and then he went back on leaden wings to his distant post, and that winter was her first in Washington society; his first in a mental Gehenna.

Less than two years from the date of their first meeting he came marching into the supply camp after a two months' sharp and trying campaign against the Indians of the southern plains. Mail communication had been sorely interrupted, and his letters had been sent to the cantonment while, with a detachment guarding Indian prisoners, he was making his eager way across the bleak prairies towards her. He had won distinction—the high praise of the official head of the expedition—and consent to another leave. The general commanding the department had come forward to meet the prisoners and had promptly granted Blake's application. And now, while on his way to Washington to win the old commodore's consent to his engagement, Blake had telegraphed to have letters meet him at St. Louis, had called there at head-quarters, and was in the office of the chief of staff when there sauntered in a tall man in civilian dress and spectacles, at sight of whom up jumped the department official.

"Hello, Granger! When did you leave Washington? By Jove, sir, when I saw you there in January I took it for granted that there you would stay. We're to congratulate you it seems. When is it to be?"

"Some time in the summer," was the smiling answer. "I'm only out on personal business here; going back to-morrow. Among other things I want you to be one of my groomsmen."

"Do it, of course. Oh, let me present Mr. Blake of the —th Infantry. He's going on too. Mr. Blake, Major Granger."

The major turned with a sudden jerk,—the oddest kind of a look on his face. The adjutant-general was astonished.

"Have you met before?" he asked.

"Not that I know of," said Blake, pleasantly, as he proffered a hand, which the major shook with evident constraint and awkwardness, then suddenly bolted from the room, saying he wished to speak to an official just passing the door.

"Queer fellow that!" said the staff-officer. "I'm blessed if I can understand what that lovely girl could see in him to marry except his money."

"Who is she?" asked Blake, indifferently.

"A daughter of old Commodore Torrance, of the navy,—Madeleine Torrance. She was a belle last—— Why, man, what's the matter?"

That night, so far from Blake's steaming eastward, his mother was hurrying to St. Louis fast as train could carry her. The blow had fallen with savage force. Despite warnings, never for an instant had Blake doubted her. And now, until that morning at Stannard's, not once had they met again. Of the letters that were eventually forwarded to the St. Louis hotel, he read just one and sent the others back with unbroken seal. There was left no doubt whatever that she had lied to him.

Then he went back to the plains, and never came in again until two years afterwards when his mother's health demanded it, and then came bereavement and

bitter self-reproach. In his blind misery he had shut himself away from the world, from even the gentle and loving mother until it was too late. His sisters lived alone now at the old homestead, and he soon returned to the frontier. Next he secured a transfer to the cavalry, and there was gradual resumption of interest in mundane and professional affairs,—a gradual reassertion of his own humorous and kindly self. Not with a living soul had he ever spoken of her since his mother's death. Never had he expected to meet, much less to speak to her again, when fate brought him back here to the very station where the —th was serving when he first joined it, and where he had good reason to suppose it would not again appear in twenty years.

Of course he had heard of her from time to time. They went abroad right after the wedding, and went amiss soon after their return. It seems that Granger lost a very heavy sum in a Wall Street deal that promised fabulous returns. It would not have been so bad had he not lost his head at the same time and quarrelled with a partner who had "stood in" with him in cotton deals in Louisiana during the war. The resultant recrimination was such that Granger was exiled from Washington to the frontier, where he recouped himself as best he could. It was about this time that his quarrels with another partner, that of his bosom, became public talk at the capital. His reputation when he left for the West was that of a man who had escaped by the Scotch verdict,—"not proven," and there were cynics who said that therein at least they were well matched. Blake never knew of this,

at least not until years afterwards. He was old enough, however, to know that in nine cases out of ten, no matter how madly a woman might profess to love one man, she forgot all about it as soon as she married another, and he had simply resolved to shut her out of his life forever.

And yet she wrote to him the moment she returned from the East, knowing him to be at Russell. He returned the note to her unopened. She had caught him at Stannard's, and he had escaped. She had written again and again, as we have seen. He had read these letters, but refused to answer. Then she had lured him to the Morris's,—and there trapped him.

How well he recalled her infinite tact and grace that day! They had gone in to luncheon almost the moment after her arrival,—she leaning on Ray's arm, then sitting next the Kentuckian and winning him in spite of himself before luncheon was half over. She knew all about Dandy, his pet horse. She knew friends and relatives of the girl with whom he was reported to be deeply in love, and to whom he was believed to be engaged. It was simply impossible for him not to be interested in her. Not until Morris had gone to the bank and luncheon was over did she lose for one instant her radiant animation. It was she who made the affair bright and successful. Blake could not talk, —could not hear what Mrs. Morris said to him. His ears refused their office, except for the sweet accents he knew so well and had so fondly loved.

At last—was it collusion?—Mrs. Morris led Mr. Ray to the conservatory—the only one in town—and

then to see their new horses. And so they were left in the parlor alone. With quick decision of manner she had risen, closed the door leading to the dining-room, then faced him,—not a sign of reproach, anger, or sorrow in her lovely face. With witching grace of manner, smiling confidently, joyously, blithely, up into his eyes, she threw forward both her jewelled hands, exclaiming,—

"Gerald, why should you refuse a woman's friendship? Why do you refuse me yours? If I thought I had not years ago killed every vestige of your love I would not ask this. If you persist in such avoidance of me you will make me—make others—believe it is because you still love me. The light went out of my life ten years ago. I have told you the truth. My marriage was forced upon me, Gerald; but it was a mercy to you. I could never have been a poor man's wife. I threw love to the winds, and took him and his wealth, and got what I deserved,—ten years of misery,—many years of reproaches, insults, taunts, blows. Yes, Gerald, and those on your account. I make no appeal for pity or compassion. I beg for mercy and you refuse. It's all over, Gerald. You have had your revenge, if you only knew it, a thousand times over. Come, don't hit a poor fellow who's down, down, down." She was smiling so trustfully up in his dark and averted face, and big tears were trembling on her long, curling lashes. "Come, Gerald, let us be friends. I swear to you I seek nothing more. All that old hope is dead, dead and buried. It isn't in you to crush a weak woman before all her kind,—to load her with contempt. They all hate me out

there at the fort; you know they do, and I haven't a friend in the world now. I'm lonely, heart-sick, hopeless, and yet—look, Gerald, I *am* in earnest, and—am I quite worth scorning?"

The eyes of men rest not often on a lovelier picture than made this fair and graceful woman, pleading so humbly through her tears. But though he turned and looked upon her as she urged, he had steeled his heart. Once only had he seen her in tears. There was even contempt in the stern, cold gaze he bent upon her.

"Mrs. Granger," he said at last, "it seems that in spite of every effort of mine you have brought about this meeting. I cannot feel the faintest wish for even the semblance of your friendship, and cannot believe you sincere in the wish for mine. You have some object in view which is beyond me to fathom."

"Gerald!" she cried. "Is this you?—you? Can you say such fearful things to me,—of me. My God! Have I fallen so low?"

She broke off as suddenly as she began; turned with a gasping cry and rushed towards the door leading to the hall. She stumbled at the piano-stool and plunged heavily forward. Down she would have gone but for his quick spring and for his strong arms. Blake never knew just how it happened,—how he managed it,—or she. For one instant she was clasped to his bounding heart as he rose to his feet. Then she broke from him, burying her face in the filmy handkerchief, swaying in an uncontrollable agony of grief, and, as she sank upon the sofa, somehow there dangled from the lace-fringed opening of her gown a locket that he had given her ten long years before. He knew it at a



"Down she would have gone but for his quick spring and for his strong arms."

Page 162.

glance. Her hand seemed suddenly to find it. As though aghast with shame and confusion she turned quickly away and thrust it back into her bosom. Then her frame shook with the violence of her sobs.

When Mrs. Morris's high-pitched voice was heard a few moments later, Madeleine Granger rose and darted into the dining-room,—and Blake followed.

And now, as he sat here thinking of Mrs. Freeman's words, he recalled every incident of the interviews that succeeded that memorable day. First there had come the major's letter, as she vowed it should, in which Granger now for the first time assured him on his honor as an officer and a gentleman that he was unable to account for the assault at his door-way that night. He would have said as much before had not the letter brought to him by Mr. Ray been so hostile in its tone that his anger was aroused, and he had refused to speak through an intermediary. He thanked him for the inestimable service rendered him, begged that by-gones might be by-gones, and that he might have the pleasure of welcoming him to his roof. Ray had scouted the letter as utterly inadequate to meet the situation; but Blake was more magnanimous. Ray said he had no confidence whatever in Granger's honor either as an officer or a gentleman, and was simply stunned when Blake accepted an invitation to dine at the depot to meet the Morrises. The Turners and Raymonds went at the same time, and Mrs. Turner forgave Mrs. Granger on the spot, and forgot everything she had ever said about her the moment she saw the elegance of that dining-room. Then the dinner call had to be paid, and meantime there was a concert

in town given by a famous company of singers *en route* to the Pacific coast, and an opera by another one going eastward; and then a dance at the hotel. Then the Grangers gave a luncheon to some friends from Denver, and four or five bachelors were bidden from the fort. And then there was a candy-pull at the Whitings in town. And then the church fair began, and Mrs. Granger was a "lady patroness," so called. And then there came one of those unaccountably mild spells that sometimes bless those barren eastward slopes in the heart of winter, and there were days of radiant sunshine and southerly breeze, and the ladies came out from town in the saddle,—Mrs. Granger looking like a Diana and Mrs. Morris like a dump,—and Granger couldn't ride at all. And then he went to Omaha, and had astonished the group at the colonel's the night before he left by exclaiming, "Oh, Blake, Mrs. Granger says if it isn't too much trouble she wishes you would come over and try the new horse I think of buying for her. I'm no judge." It was Blake and Granger now when they addressed each other, and there was much apparent off-hand cordiality. And then such charming little notes were coming every day or so: "Mon ami,—If you and Mr. Royce will drop in for luncheon to-day, Mrs. Morris and I will be charmed. We might drive her home later. Sincerely, M. G."—all so frank, friendly, unconstrained. Anybody could read them. For that matter, anybody could have heard every word that had passed between them since that day in the Morrises' dining-room. Who could possibly be less sentimental, more sunshiny, jolly, frank, merry, than Mrs. Granger? The record-

ing angel of that other and better world, said Blake to himself, could have seen or heard nothing in her that would not bear the strictest scrutiny. It was these terrestrial angels and envious critics at the fort who saw beneath the exquisite polish of the surface and condemned her.

And as for Blake, was there any reason he should deny himself the pleasure of her society so long as nothing but laughing cordiality ruled their frequent meetings? He was at his best when with her, never more joyous, never more full of mirth and fun. How she applauded his parodies and bemoaned his puns! What peals of silvery laughter greeted his sallies! What fun they had at the fair in town! What glowing delight in those glorious gallops over the rolling prairies! How admirably her step seemed atuned to his as, after all those years, they waltzed again together in long, gliding measure to the dreamy music of that famous band! Who could find in the polished and platonic armor of such a friendship one flaw in which to drive the poisoned point of scandal? He was too keen an observer not to see and know that his comrades lamented and that his lady friends in the —th resented his defection; but he held that they had no right to misjudge him or her, and so long as no one spoke, so long was there no need for him to defend. But now Mrs. Freeman had spoken, and matters were taking shape that must be met. Down in the depths of his heart he knew that her charge was fully sustained. He was Mrs. Granger's shadow everywhere. He was bidden everywhere she went. He did send regrets "owing to previous engagements" when bidden

anywhere where she was not. He thought it amply sufficient that he had such engagements. He did not know what others suspected,—that she had early information of every forthcoming dance or dinner or card party at the fort and, on one pretext or another, preempted his services for that very hour. He did not know that the absent and much lamented Hollis had been manipulated in precisely the same way, and that people were now comparing him with the absent in terms that plainly showed they deemed him much the bigger fool of the two. He was drifting along, fatuous and self-deluded, vainly telling himself the world was not pointing to him in derision. He was stifling the still, small voice ever crying in his heart of hearts and bidding him be a man: cut loose at once and for all from this unhallowed fascination. Once or twice he had roused himself to sudden effort and kept aloof for several hours. The little note that promptly came to the rear door, borne by the English coachman, never made the faintest complaint of this, but claimed his prompt presence on some plea which he could not resist. And now Mrs. Freeman had raised the veil and he was compelled to look. War against it though he might, her word was true. When a man abandons the society of all other women and is content only in the presence of one it is idle to prate of platonic friendship. Until now he had never dreamed that his chains were welded with tenfold strength,—welded all the more firmly because they were welded anew. But the honest little woman with the clear, truthful, fearless eyes had looked straight into his soul and told him that which he could not deny,—and he had turned and fled.

CHAPTER XI.

"BLAKE, I thought you were going to give us 'Still Waters Run Deep,'" said Mr. Royce, a few days later, as the crowd gathered at the club-room on the way back from stables.

"So did I," was the reply from behind an outspread newspaper, and not another word would Mr. Blake vouchsafe in explanation.

"Well, but see here. Of course I don't mean to pry into matters that may be none of my business," said Royce, after an embarrassing pause; "but that certainly was the arrangement, and so I announced it in town. Now people want to know why it was changed."

"Tell them we couldn't give it without Hollis for the heavy villain," said Blake, still intrenched behind the *Times*, a paper that he vehemently denounced and as religiously read.

Royce glanced at Clark and Hunter, who sat there silent listeners.

"Then it's only postponed until Tommy gets back, is it? And meantime we give 'Caste' because it has no heavy villain?"

"That's about the size of it," was the short answer.

For a moment more no one spoke. Clark was a man, however, who did not propose to allow the matter

to be so summarily settled. After a moment's hesitation he moved over to the table where Blake was seated and spoke in low tone.

"See here, Blake, I'll tell you what I heard in town, from good authority too. I don't mean to say it's true at all, but it will give you an idea of the ingenuity of people in accounting for things that are not fully explained. It is said that the change had to be made because Mrs. Freeman would not play the part of 'Mrs. Mildmay' if Mrs. Granger was in the cast."

Blake flushed hotly, but bit his lips and gathered himself before making reply.

"Mrs. Freeman refused on general principles, Clark. She said she could not act at all."

"Well, it was a friend of Mrs. Granger's who told me; and Mrs. Granger is reported to have said she knew that Mrs. Freeman refused because of her."

"I know better."

"Did you tell Mrs. Granger the real reason given by Mrs. Freeman?" asked Clark.

"I haven't seen Mrs. Granger to speak to since day before yesterday," was the curt answer, and Blake's face was hidden by the paper, which he again raised as though to read.

"Well, who are in the new cast?" persisted Clark.

"Mrs. Turner will play 'Esther,' Dana takes 'D'Alroy,' Ross of the infantry 'Eccles,'—he's tiptop too,—and I'll see what I can do with 'Hautree.'"

"Who'll be 'Polly Eccles'?"

"Mrs. Granger."

"Mrs. Granger! 'Polly Eccles!' Why, I'd as soon think of Juno playing 'Audrey.' Mrs. Granger that

romping, rollicking hoyden? Why, man, you wouldn't dare ask her!"

"All the same she's going to take it."

"Oh, well, all right. You're manager, and I'm satisfied. But it will just astonish this garrison!" And with that the quartermaster turned away and sauntered over to the pool-table, where some of the youngsters were trying to "stick" old Wilkins, and making a failure every time.

It did astonish the garrison. That night at the colonel's table, where a dozen officers and ladies were dining; at the houses along the row where the bachelors happened to call; even over the solemn rubber of whist at the post-surgeon's, the principal topic of conversation was the coming play and Mrs. Granger's surprising acceptance of such a part as that of "Polly Eccles." All manner of theories were advanced in explanation. Mrs. Waldron had seen it played by the Rankins, who had one of the prettiest women in the world to take the *rôle* of the merry, romping sister, and who made it really the central figure of the drama; possibly that was Mrs. Granger's idea. Mrs. Atherton, who had been closely studying her brilliant neighbor of the depot, was inclined to the belief that no one at Russell had yet begun to realize her versatile powers, and that she had accepted a part so apparently unworthy in order to give Fort Russell a genuine surprise. Old Stannard, who had taken a decided prejudice against the lady, blurted out that his idea was that she would take any part that would keep her coming to the fort, and then, as was invariably the case when he had said a sharp or satirical thing, he

blushed and looked as though he wished he had held his tongue. Mrs. Turner seemed really to rejoice in the situation. She had of late begun to conceive it the duty of some one in the —th to make headway against the social queendom so manifestly held by Mrs. Granger in town and to a certain extent at the fort. There was no gainsaying the fact that, without the faintest apparent effort on that lady's part, the men instinctively gathered about her at every entertainment, and it was gall and wormwood to Mrs. Turner's soul. She was a woman who would rather have had it said of herself that wherever she went the men thronged to do her homage than that the blessings of the fatherless and the widow were rained upon her path. She was one of those women who, having this desire, resorted to the most threadbare expedients, the most transparent devices, to bring men to her side. If she had gathered one or two about her, her bright eyes roamed restlessly around in search of more, and no man could come within hail who was not summoned by some such claim as, "Don't you think so, Captain Freeman?" or, "I'll leave it to you, Mr. Blake," or, "Here's Mr. Ray, he can tell us." And, being thus summoned by name, the would-be passer-by simply had to stop and take place for a moment at least in the surrounding circle. It was the old, old, dreary device, yet it lives perennial, and the user little dreams how thin, how pitifully thin, 'tis worn. But now, thought Mrs. Turner, the time had come to down her rival. Surely the interest of the play would centre on that lovely, lovelorn heroine, and romping "Polly" would be nowhere. She never dreamed the real truth,—indeed, who did? It

was Madeleine Granger who chose the play, who named the cast, who bade Mr. Blake tender the part of "Esther" to Mrs. Turner.

"She cannot act," said Blake.

"She thinks she can, Gerald, and she will jump at the chance," was the answer. And jump she did, quickly as ever she had at a conclusion.

And so during the week rehearsals were going on every day; sometimes at the depot, sometimes at the post, and finally at the barrack theatre, and Blake came no more to Freeman's quarters, where every morning sat the bonny wife reading aloud with Nannie Bryan.

The play was to be given on Tuesday night, and Sunday had come. All day long the cold had been intense. The keen blast from the northwest towards sunset died away, and the light on the snow-clad peaks to the south and the tips of the eastward ridges had been simply dazzling. Now in the frosty gloaming the lamps began to twinkle here and there around the big parade, and such men as had to appear out of doors were muffled to the eyes in fur. The few sentries tramped briskly up and down their "guarded land," stamping in their big buffalo overshoes and thrashing their fur gauntlets across their broad chests.

"Relieve them every hour, Freeman," was the colonel's order to the officer of the day, as they trudged up from the never-neglected stable duties. "And have them visited frequently to-night lest they become benumbed and fall asleep."

Over at the big brown hospital the thermometer had registered twenty below at four o'clock, and now the

mercury was slipping down out of sight, and the spirit gauge was hung outside the steward's door. At nine o'clock the colonel's orderly went running around from barrack to barrack to say that the men need not turn out for roll-call at tattoo, and at 9.30 that call was sounded by the trumpeter of the guard alone. All over the garrison the big coal-stoves were glowing like so many furnaces, and the anthracite gave up its store of warmth and comfort to scores of grateful mortals huddling about them. Women and children were nowhere abroad on such a night, and only a few among the bachelors ventured around, though Sunday-evening calls were quite a feature at the post, and many a time the clans gathered about Mrs. Atherton's piano, and the strains of Moody and Sankey were borne to many a listening ear. But this night it seemed too cold for all but the most determined to sally forth, and down at the club-room, around the red-hot globe of glowing coals, four or five young fellows were sipping Muldoon's "hot Scotch" and thanking Providence that it was not their tour for guard. And Blake was there restlessly pacing the floor, ever and anon gazing out of the east window and steadfastly declining anything to drink.

At last the trumpet sounded the first call for tattoo, and just then Blake started back from the window, took three quick steps towards the east door, then, as though suddenly recollecting himself, halted, stopped an instant at the stove, and then without a word stalked away towards the west door.

"Where're you going, Legs? There's no roll-call," shouted Clark.

"I know it," answered Blake, shortly.

"Going home? All right. Hold on; I'll go with you."

"But I'm not," said Blake, letting himself quickly out into the storm-shed and banging the door behind him.

"Well, I'm going anyway," said Clark, with a laugh. "Poor old Legs! What a Godsend it would be if we were only ordered back to Arizona—for him. Come on, Royce!"

No one cared to speak of Blake just then, but Clark and Royce followed on out into the keen, sparkling night. A cold moon was hanging low in the west, a mere faint crescent, but aloft the stars fairly blazed in the fathomless vault of the heavens. It was light enough to see all moving objects along the parade, the roadway and the walk, and Blake was nowhere ahead of them. Instinctively, Clark turned as they reached the road and glanced back towards the eastern gate beyond the store. A tall, soldierly figure, muffled in great-coat and furs stood silently there gazing away southeastward across the bleak prairie. Blake, then, had taken the roundabout way to reach his goal. For an instant the quartermaster hesitated, looking wistfully towards the shadowy form. Far beyond it the dim lights of the distant town twinkled across the prairie. More to the southward and nearer at hand a brighter glow came from the westward windows of the great depot. Those two that seemed nearest and brightest were from Granger's quarters; and suddenly on the floor above, as though the blinds were just thrown open, appeared a third, forming with those below a nearly equilateral triangle. Instantly the

tall figure at the gate turned sharply to the south and rapidly disappeared behind the low wooden buildings and in the direction of the stables.

Royce, too, had halted, as though he desired to look back. Clark linked arms with him and briefly said, "Come on."

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Billy Ray left the Truscotts', where he always spent his Sunday evenings, and came bustling into the sitting-room of his own quarters, where Hogan had a glowing fire to greet him; but Blake was missing. It was midnight when the front door softly opened, was closed and locked from the inside; and Ray, lying snug and warm in his nest with a certain little picture clasped tight to his heart, heard his comrade tiptoeing up the stairs.

"He doesn't want to see or talk with me," sighed Ray to himself; "I won't worry him by calling."

It was just after midnight when the officer of the day, anxious about his sentries in that bitter cold, came striding down the bluff, and was promptly, sharply challenged by the muffled trooper who stepped forward from the shadows of the stables.

"Who comes there?"

"Officer of the day."

"Advance, officer of the day, with the countersign."

Freeman never halted until the muzzle of the carbine was almost at his breast.

"Winchester," he muttered, in low tone, and then, without waiting for the conventional "Advance, officer of the day," instantly queried,—

"Are you all right, sentry?—Sure you're not freezing?"

"I'm all right, sir," was the cheery answer. "I double time every few minutes."

"How long have you been on?"

"Since 11.30, sir."

"Everything all right on your post?"

"All right, sir. An officer rode in who hadn't the countersign, but I recognized and passed him."

"An officer!" exclaimed Freeman, in surprise. "On horseback?"

"Yes, sir: Lieutenant Blake."

Captain Freeman suddenly ceased his questions, turned back and tramped up the line until he came to the door of his troop stables. Here he pressed the latch and pushed up a little trap in the main gate, and, bowing low and stepping high, he let himself in and stood erect once more in the long, dimly-lighted gangway between the stalls. There he found his stable sergeant and orderly briskly rubbing down a steaming horse that had evidently been ridden hard and fast. He knew Blake's charger at a glance, and his face was full of gloom as he stepped slowly forward. The men stood erect an instant and saluted as they recognized their captain, then resumed their work.

"Sergeant Jamieson, did you not know it was against the colonel's orders that any government horse should be taken out after taps without his permission or that of the officer of the day. You certainly knew that this was not Lieutenant Blake's private property?"

"Certainly, sir," answered the English sergeant, again standing erect. "But the lieutenant went out before taps. He sent Hogan down soon after eight to say he might need his horse and to keep him saddled

and ready. Mr. Blake came hurrying down about tattoo, and when he got back the horse looked as though he had run several miles."

Freeman said nothing more. He paced slowly down the dim corridor, as though glancing at the fastenings of the horses, and seeing that the halter-straps were neither so long that the animal could back out or entangle himself, or so short as to prevent his lying down with comfort. Most of the horses were already deep in their thick beds of clean fresh straw, and some of them slowly lifted their heads and gazed at him with sleepy eyes; others were still on their feet, but drowsy and torpid. The captain looked about with pride and satisfaction at the evidences of care on every hand.

"That ex-hussar is a jewel of a stable sergeant," he thought to himself, "if he *was* a deserter, as the men say. Odd!" he continued his train of thought, a grim smile curling the lips under that heavy moustache. "'Twas a woman who drove him out of the Prince of Wales's 'cherry pants' and into our sky-blue and mustard. The women are the best recruiting officers we have after all. They send a thousand men into the army every year, and occasionally square matters by driving a fellow out of it. Who'll be the next in the —th to go, I wonder?"

Once again the sharp, clear challenge of the sentry rang out on the cold night air. The answer was inaudible. "Advance and be recognized," was the sentry's order; and then the little trap-door was suddenly pushed open, a fur-covered head and body came thrusting through the gap and shooting up to a height of six

feet, and the pale, anxious face of Lieutenant Blake was revealed in the dim light of the stable lanterns.

"Sergeant Jamieson, I've dropped some letters from my overcoat-pocket; have you seen anything of them?"

"Not a sign, sir," said the sergeant, in his prompt, soldierly way, as he stood erect and raised his hand in salute. "Where does the lieutenant think he dropped them? Here, Murphy, go you and search with the lieutenant. I'll put up the horse." And as the sergeant led the tired bay to his stall, Blake's face turned a shade whiter, and there was unmistakable start and agitation, for there stood the officer of the day, the man of all others in the —th who had known him longest, been his stanchest friend, and from whom of late he had drifted almost helplessly away. For an instant no word was spoken. The two men stood there in silence looking at each other, then Freeman held out his hand.

"What is wrong, Blake, old man? Can't I help you?"

With something almost like a sob, Blake turned sharply away.

"Nobody can help me, Freeman. My God!—nobody."

CHAPTER XII.

"CASTE" was to be given Tuesday night. Monday evening there was a dress rehearsal and a modified sensation. It was still sharply cold, and Blake had been at his wits' end, apparently, striving all day long to warm that barn-like structure in which the entertainments of the garrison, social and dramatic, were generally given. He had moved two more stoves into the old barracks, a feat which, on account of the narrowness of the doors, gave no little trouble, and punched two additional stovepipe-holes in the roof, a feat which gave no trouble at all; and with four fires consuming anthracite at a ruinous rate it was to be supposed that any ordinary building would be reasonably warm. Nevertheless "Polly Eccles" begged to be excused from removing either her sealskin wrap or the "toque" with its coquettish and most becoming adornment. She wore her collar turned up about the throat, too, which was unusual for Mrs. Granger, whose throat was round and white and blue-veined and beautiful, and the lackadaisical, lovelorn "Esther," impersonated by Mrs. Turner, was observed to be in a state of remarkable excitement, both on and off the stage. She forgot her part, needed incessant promptings both as to cues, lines, and "business," and Blake was savagely sarcastic on more than one occasion. Something in Mrs. Granger's appearance seemed to positively fascinate her volatile

friend and fellow-actress, for the latter's bright, lustrous eyes followed her every movement. Still, the rehearsal went off rather well in other respects, Blake's haw-haw, heavy swell manner as "Hautree" keeping everybody in a titter, however, and evoking loud applause from the audience, which consisted of Major Granger, just back from Omaha, and Captain Turner, who, for reasons best known to himself, had decided to go with his wife, and who managed to keep close to her side whenever she was not actually on the stage. Granger was looking rather more sallow and dyspeptic than ever, and seemed singularly nervous and irritable. Twice, thrice, the exits of "Polly" or "Hautree" brought these two artists into the wings on the same side, and at such moments the manager seemed to lose sight and hearing of the play, for errors went by unremarked, so far as he was concerned, and Ross and Dana had to correct and counsel. At last the rehearsal was over. Mrs. Turner insisted on everybody's coming across the parade to her house for a cup of hot coffee or bouillon. A messenger was sent to the stables for the Grangers' carriage, which, with blanketed horses, had been standing in the stables of Freeman's troop meantime; and when it was heard at the Turners' gate, Mrs. Turner became all eagerness and hospitality.

"Now, Mrs. Granger, I know Grimsby must be half frozen; do let him come right into the hall and have some bouillon or coffee before you start. Our man will stand at the horses' heads."

But Mrs. Granger would not listen to it; neither would the major. They must return at once, they protested. Even in the parlor Mrs. Granger declined to

remove her cloak: the carriage, she said, would come instantly. And, indeed, they had barely reached the house before its wheels were heard, and she had hardly time to sip her cup of coffee. Granger hastily led her forth, and almost sharply ordered every one else not to venture out into the cold night air. She was not even seated in the landau when he shouted to the driver, "Go on!" And off went the spirited team, Granger springing to his wife's side as they whirled away.

No sooner were her guests departed to their various homes than Mrs. Turner dropped on the sofa in a state of apparent collapse, and the captain anxiously inquired what was wrong.

"I declare I don't know. I'm utterly used up and unstrung. Have we any champagne in the house? I just long for a glass."

"We have none here, Fan, but I'll trot right down to the club and fetch some," promptly answered the captain, ever eager to humor the fancies of his pretty helpmeet.

"Oh, I hate to have you go out,—way down there in the cold, and yet I do so long for a little Roederer,—just a glass."

"You shall have it in three minutes, dear," said Turner, already struggling into his big overcoat. Then out he darted into the starry night. No sooner was he across the piazza than she sprang from the sofa, fluttered through the dining-room and out into the kitchen, where voices and laughter had been audible for some time.

"Mina, you told me Grimsby was dismissed, and he was here to-night."

"No 'twasn't, Miss Turner; that wasn't Grimsby; that was one of the depot men dressed up in Grimsby's things. He'll never work for the Grangers any more. Maybe you don't believe what I told you, but it's true. You ask Annie; you ask Sergeant Jamieson if that was Grimsby that drove to-night."

"You said Annie heard all the trouble last night, every bit of it?" asked Mrs. Turner.

"She couldn't help hearing it! Grimsby was drunk and just shouting. Mr. Blake,—he didn't talk loud, but she could hear him all the same. The major was the maddest man when he got there, I tell you,—Annie says you could have heard him all over the prairie, and it's a wonder Mr. Blake didn't hear her and come back when he tried to choke her. Annie says it's going to be a mighty sight of trouble, for when Grimsby came for his breakfast this morning he just swore he'd be even with the Grangers, both of them; that he could tell things that would bring them both down, and he'd do it, too. He came up to the post this afternoon and wanted to see Lieutenant Blake, and Blake——"

"*Mr.* Blake, Mina," said Mrs. Turner, primly. "You shouldn't speak of gentlemen without giving them their titles."

"Well, when he cuts up this way with Mrs. Granger I don't see no use for being so mighty polite,—and the lieutenant sent Hogan down to tell him to clear out and never show his face at the fort again without his permission; and he just went by here swearing mad. I heard him. He went out to Bryan's ranch. He didn't go back to the depot neither. He stopped down

at the stables and had a long talk with that English Sergeant Jamieson. Corporal Murphy told Mrs. Finnigan,—her that's laundress for 'L' troop,—and she told me. And Annie says you can see the black marks on Mrs. Granger's throat this morning just as plain as daylight."

"But how did Mr. Blake happen to be there such a night? I don't understand," queried Mrs. Turner, her eyes, mouth, and ears all open.

"She sent for him. Annie says that's what the row was about. Mr. Blake hadn't been there for two days, and when he didn't come yesterday morning she sent Grimsby up with a note, and he swore it was an outrage to send him up in such awful weather. And he began drinking when he got back,—said he was frozen, —and so when she ordered him to hitch up at nine o'clock and drive to the railway depot to meet Major Granger he was drunk, and swore he wouldn't, and dared her to discharge him. Oh, he said awful things; Annie heard him, and she ran up-stairs—Mrs. Granger did—with a big lamp from the parlor, and Grimsby stumbled off to the store, and the next thing Mr. Blake came tearing down on horseback. She cried, and he went off to find Grimsby, but could not, and was gone a good while, and came and told her Grimsby was neither anywhere about the depot nor any drinking-bar near it; he must have gone to town and he'd got to follow him; and just as he was going out the major came in. He'd got a carriage in town somewhere. He was looking blacker than—— Oh, Annie said it was awful. She went in just then with a hod of coal, and he ordered her out, and stamped and swore, and Mrs

Granger laughed at first, and then he grabbed her,—Annie saw him,—and Mrs. Granger screamed and ran to her room and locked the door. Annie says he just stood outside and begged and cried half the night. Of course Mr. Blake,—he'd gone away the moment after the major came. Annie says that it was long after twelve o'clock before he left that door, where he was begging and imploring her to forgive him and let him in——"

But here Miss Mina came to an abrupt stop, crestfallen and dismayed. The dining-room door had suddenly opened, and Mrs. Turner, recalled from the thrilling interest of this tale to a contemplation of her own surroundings, found herself confronted by the sad, reproachful face of her husband.

"Here is your Roederer, Fan," he said, quietly, but with a choke in his voice. "It needs no ice.—Mina, you should be at home at this hour. Oblige me by going at once and—never setting foot under my roof again."

When a moment later he closed the dining-room door, after seeing his wife safely through, Captain Turner took her hand and led her into the parlor.

"Fanny," he said, "you had heard this story before to-night. It had been told you before you went to rehearsal, for I heard that girl's voice in the kitchen. You knew that the Grangers had discharged Grimsby when you urged her to let him come in and get warm did you not?"

For all answer she threw herself upon the lounge, and, bursting into tears, rocked to and fro in an ecstasy of melodramatic grief. For several minutes she could

not speak, and he stood sadly before her looking upon her with eyes in which no sign of anger lived, nothing but pity and infinite sorrow. At last through her sobs and tears she cried,—

"I declare, Captain Turner, it is simply heartless,—monstrous in you to shame me so before the servants." And Turner without another word slowly left the room, and once again walked forth into the bitter night.

It was about eleven o'clock. The air was crisp, keen, and still. The crescent moon was hanging over the snow-covered summits far to the west, where ran the ridge-line of the Rockies. The stars were gleaming in the heavens, and, just as on the previous evening, the lights of the distant town twinkled across the three-mile stretch of prairie; but all was darkness at the great depot midway between. Turner looked irresolutely up the row. A little party, merry and joyous, came laughing out into the frosty night air from the colonel's quarters, and half a dozen couples were presently walking briskly towards him. He heard Ray's ringing voice, so full of life and hope and gladness, mingling with the silvery tones of some of the ladies. He heard Stannard guffawing over some joke which had been perpetrated at Hollis's expense, and as they drew nearer Mrs. Truscott queried,—

"And where is Mr. Hollis now?—and isn't it time we heard from him again?"

Turner was in no mood to meet so gay a party. After one moment of hesitation he faced eastward, and lo! up the walk from the store came a quartette of jovial bachelors,—"the boys" who had been down for a nightcap of Muldoon's hot-Scotch, and were now

homeward bound. He cared as little to meet them, and so retracing his steps to his own door, there, too, he halted. What awaited him at his fireside but tears, reproaches, wretchedness? It was useless to attempt to reason with her; to point out the shame and unworthiness of her conduct; to plead with her to give ear to his advice and counsel, or to lay upon her his commands. She would only weep and moan and lament the cruelty of her fate, the bitterness of her life, all mi-judged, misunderstood, miserable, as she declared it to be. No, he turned quickly and walked on the creaking boards, snapping with the cold under his feet, around by the side of his little army home, and so, out upon the frozen, turfless soil of the unsightly back yard. The rear gate stood open, and while he himself was yet in the shadow of his quarters he saw a muffled form pass quickly across the gap,—some one going along the line of fence that separated the back yards from the prairie, and some one who was closely hugging that fence as though desirous of being seen by none. It was not a sentry, for the colonel had ordered the discontinuance of the post in the rear of the officers' row in such bitter weather. It did not look like a soldier at all. There was still a light burning in his kitchen, where the cook was now finishing the labors which had been discontinued during Mina's entertaining visit. There was the hole in the fence through which that voluble young woman was wont to make her way. He remembered afterwards that, as he strode quickly by, he resolved to have it boarded up on the morrow; but now he wished to see who this night-prowler could be. Nothing of the kind had been heard of since the pre

vious summer, when there was for a week or so a delicious mystery,—a serenader. A man who would go prowling along the back fence a night like this must needs have powerful incentive. No soldiers, not even the bandsman, would have any excuse for coming that way, and whoever it was there was something stealthy and furtive about his movements. Turner was unarmed, but that made no difference to him. A few of his long strides brought him to the gate, and there he could dimly see the line of fence for full a hundred yards either way. Not a living being was in sight. There was but one explanation,—he had turned in at a near gate-way. Could it after all have been some one of the officers' "strikers" who slept in some little nook or corner under his superior's roof? Was it that Irish scamp, Hogan? No; neither in garb nor gait was there anything of the soldier about this fellow. Turning eastward, the captain stepped quickly along, entered the next gate and peered keenly about him. The doors of the various sheds were closed. No one was there; neither was there in the next. It was at the third yard that he stopped short. There were voices in low, excited conversation across the fence, in the yard of the quarters occupied by Ray and Blake, and, beyond all peradventure, one of those voices was Blake's own. And now the other began, a whining, querulous plea in unmistakably cockney accent.

"Hannythink, capting, hannythink you may say will 'elp me. Don't let a poor devil be turned hout in the cold without a shilling."

"Be silent!" interrupted the other voice,—Blake's,—as Turner whirled impatiently away, unwilling to hear

another word of colloquy. "You have threatened, bullied, lied, blackmailed." Turner could not but hear that much as he hurried away. A quick turn to the left carried him beyond ear-shot of further talk in that yard; but not of what followed. He had gone not a dozen steps when the thud of blows, the rasp of scuffling feet upon the icy ground caught his ear; and as he hastened back one dark form came reeling out of the gate, another followed, lunging viciously. The second it was that slipped and fell, and the first was upon the other in an instant. As Turner leaped to the spot a knife gleamed in the moonlight. With sinewy hand the captain seized the cockney by the coat-collar, and, hurling him back, dealt him one fierce blow that sent him sprawling to earth. Blake was up in an instant, breathless, but unharmed.

"Don't hurt him, Turner. That's enough. My God!" he gasped, "you got here just in time. Get up, you hound!" And he gave one contemptuous kick at his fallen adversary. "Get up! Never mind looking for your knife, sir; I'll take care of that. And now, unless you want to be lodged in jail with the charge of attempted murder over your head, unless you want to be lynched by the Irishmen in this post, put a hundred miles between yourself and Cheyenne inside of twelve hours, and never let us hear from you again. Here, you cur, take that and go!" And as he spoke, Blake flung a little wad of bills into the face of the still bewildered coachman, who slowly found his feet, and, merely pausing one moment to shake a clinched fist and mutter one savage curse, the half-drunken fellow went slouching away.

Then Blake and Turner confronted each other. The face of the former pale, haggard, careworn; that of the latter unutterably sad.

"What business has that—that man going in that direction, Blake? He should be off to town."

"He has a buckboard outside the band-quarters, captain, and a man from Bryan's ranch. That is where he says he came from. It seems he had some business with Bryan this evening, and there's where he got his liquor."

"How happens it he came here to your quarters, and you meet him? Blake, do you begin to know how people are talking?—how you are harming yourself and—her?"

Against the rough old board fence Blake leaned wearily. He drew the sleeve of his heavy coat across his eyes, hiding his face, and for a moment made no reply. At last the arm dropped suddenly.

"Turner," said Blake, striding forward until he stood face to face with the captain, "I know you so well that I need not ask you to keep my confidence. I know nothing of what they say, but can conjecture. I know this, that I am in hell, and that one way or another this thing ends to-morrow night."

With that he turned sharply away, and the captain, still standing in the cold and darkness, heard him kick in the warped and ill-fitting door that resisted for the instant his entrance to his lonely quarters.

CHAPTER XIII.

TUESDAY evening—the long-expected Tuesday—had come, and the post theatre was crowded. Immediately in front of the little stage with its flaring footlights the orchestra of the —th was seated. Then on camp-stools and low chairs the officers' children were chatting together, eager, excited, and full of joyous anticipation. Proud mammas or attentive nurse-maids were close behind their respective broods, the former now bending forward to restrain the impetuosity of some vigorous young soldier or to check the too voluble tongue of the dainty fairy, "the image of her mother," then leaning back and looking over their shoulders to exchange confidences with garrison friends in the row in rear, where were seated mammas whose children were big enough to take care of themselves or so tender in years as to have no interest in the momentous proceedings of the evening. Here and there among the dames and damsels were scattered the officers of the post and masculine visitors from the neighborhood. Cheyenne had sent a large contingent of its *élite*, and Mrs. Morris and her coterie were provided with floral offerings presumably for the benefit of their social idol, Mrs. Granger. For, though she did not know it,—as is the case with most of us,—pretty Mrs. Turner had no real conception of the opinion enter-

tained of her by a large section of local society; and it was not likely that the roses and carnations peeping from Mrs. Morris's lap, the product of her own conservatory, could be intended for any one so distinctly, though unwittingly, unpopular as the self-supposed heroine of the play. Seven or eight rows of chairs extending, except for narrow aisles on each side, entirely across the hall were thus occupied by the families of the officers and their friends. Then came a row made up of such unsocial creatures as Crane, Carroll, Wilkins, some of the quartermasters and commissary clerks, and other depot employés. Then row upon row of benches, somewhat raised above the level in front, and here swarmed the wives and children of the non-commissioned officers; and then the entire lower end of the hall was crowded by the troopers and infantrymen, keen critics and yet warm partisans; for, as was well known, there were probably a dozen among their number who could "give points" over and over again to any dramatically-inclined mortal among the shoulder-straps. The management had carefully taken up the canvas covering of the floor so that the spotless dancing-surface should not suffer. The flag-draped partitions that had divided off the lower end of the room at the time of the ladies' german were all now removed, and every available foot of space in rear of the entrance doors was solidly packed by the boys in blue. The orchestra had already played the overture to Massaniello and received its round of applause, and the leader kept glancing eagerly towards the hand-worn edge of the drop-curtain at the prompter's side, expectant of the signal to start the music which was to usher in

act first of Robertson's famous comedy. But, though a hand appeared for an instant, it was hastily withdrawn. There was evident cause for delay, and once more the children, who had been hushed in expectation, began their tittering chat.

"Two to one they're waiting for Mrs. Turner," whispered Stannard to Mrs. Atherton. "She never was known to be ready on time."

The colonel, sitting on the other side of his wife and talking at the moment with the Waldrons, glanced at his play-bill and then at his watch. "Fifteen minutes late now," he said; then looked over his shoulder to where Granger sat, gaunt and spectacled, trying to entertain Mrs. Gregg,—who couldn't bear him.

"You were behind the scenes ten minutes ago, major; wasn't everything apparently ready then?" asked Atherton.

"Apparently, yes, sir. Mrs. Granger was all ready an hour ago. The other ladies seemed all ready too."

Over at the end of their row Captain Turner was seated chatting in low tone with Freeman, whose bonny wife, with her olive-branches and Nannie Bryan, occupied chairs almost in the middle of the second row. Every one was remarking the change that had been effected in "Prairie Nan's" appearance since Mrs. Freeman had begun to take such an interest in her, and to-night the child was positively pretty. Her great tumbling tresses had been gathered up upon her head and fastened there with something like the snood of the Highland maidens; her rounded cheeks were softly flushed, her big eyes sparkled with animation and interest, and her gown was the most becoming

thing she had ever been known to wear; it was entirely new and unquestionably of Mrs. Freeman's designing; and unquestionably, too, that sweet-faced little woman was proud of her *protégée* and rejoiced when she was noticed and spoken to, as happened time and again. Even at this moment Mrs. Truscott was bending forward to say something which heightened the flush of pleasure on the young girl's cheek, and Mr. Ray, who was Mrs. Truscott's escort,—Jack being temporarily detained as officer of the day,—nodded smiling approval, saying,—

"You look almost as stunning as you do in the saddle, Nan. Nobody can beat you there." And this, coming from such authority, seemed to fill her cup of bliss to the brim.

It was fully twenty minutes after eight. The orchestra was playing a second overture, in obedience to signals from the stage, when Captain Truscott, holding his sabre in his hand so as to prevent its clanking, made his way quietly up the side aisle, and found a chair reserved for him next that of his wife. She looked up into his face with the loving welcome of her expressive eyes, and saw instantly that something out of the common had happened.

"Anything wrong, Jack?" she whispered, nestling her hand into his, as he removed his glove.

"Nothing of consequence, dear; a little trouble among some of the drivers from town. Haven't they begun yet?"

"No; there's some delay. It will be eleven and later before they finish, will it not?"

"Yes. Blake said it took over two hours and a

half at least, and that, with their inexperience, it would take much more."

But here the orchestra suddenly ceased; there was an instant of whirling over the leaves of music, and then, with a flourish of his bow, the leader signalled, and up went the curtain to an accompaniment of a merry, tuneful air. Up it went a few feet at least, then there was a balk. One side hoisted higher than the other, and the painted town of "Irun on the Bidassoa" began to roll up askew, whereat there was a titter which increased to a general laugh as Mr. Wilkins was heard to call out, "Steady there! Dress to the left," and then to a shout of merriment as "the Honorable George D'Alroy" briskly entered D. R. 2 E. only to find the curtain descending for a straightening out, whereat he whirled about and came into violent collision with a tall eye-glassed swell, just appearing at the same door. When, after a moment's delay, the curtain was induced to go up straight and the two officers entered in conventional mufti, "the Honorable Mr. D'Alroy" could hardly keep his face straight, and the dawdling, languid "Hautree" was observed to have an unusual flush upon his cheeks. The explanatory dialogue between the love-smitten subaltern and the heavy-swell captain was allowed to go on without other symptoms of interest on the part of the audience than an occasional titter among the children. It was the inebriated "Eccles" who scored the first point, and whose triumphant exit, after securing "the loan of a sov" from "Mr. D'Alroy," fairly brought down the house. And then there was a moment of hushed expectation as Mr. Dana—a very handsome "D'Alroy"

he made too—announced the coming of the heroine, and a gentle stir of welcoming applause greeted the timid, half-shy, half-joyous entrance of the lovely "Esther." She swept forward as though to greet her lover, halted irresolute at sight of "Hautree," and then forgot them both, and smiled and bowed and smirked, and bowed again, and even essayed a stately Rosina Vokes courtesy in acknowledgment of a greeting which called for no such elaborate response. Anybody could see that the stage-manager was more than vexed. But, oh, why should the simple, modest, poverty-stricken London girl be attired in a tailor-made street suit of the latest fashion? Every woman in the audience saw the solecism at a glance.

"I'll bet ten to one that was the cause of the delay," growled Stannard to Mrs. Atherton, after it had been pointed out to him. And he was right. She had worn a very different garb at the dress rehearsal the night before, and had counted on escaping Blake's managerial eye until after the opening of the first act, and thus exhibiting the charming toilet just received from the distant East; but he had come upon her unawares, and then ensued a scene not down on the bills. Blake insisted that her costume was entirely inappropriate and begged her to change it. Mrs. Turner responded that when she saw what a guy the proper dress made her, she couldn't bring herself to wear it, and would not; and then "Legs" made his fatal blunder.

"Good heavens, Mrs. Turner," he had exclaimed, "you looked lovely in it last night, and it was perfectly in accord with Mrs. Granger's, and she looks lovely in hers now. Do send right over and get it."

But this was just where the shoe pinched. Mrs. Granger did look lovely in her simple but exquisitely-fitting costume. She had a figure whose beauty was actually enhanced by the plainness of her gown; whereas Mrs. Turner's strong point was her face, not her form, and it took consummate art to make the latter beauteous. Determined not to appear at a disadvantage, Mrs. Turner had planned this scheme, and now she would not budge.

"Oh, yes, I know very well how Mrs. Granger looks, Mr. Blake," was her spirited reply; "and though *you* have eyes for nobody else, other people may not be so indifferent as to how the ladies of our regiment look. I suppose it was Mrs. Granger who sent you here to tell me to change. I simply won't,—it's too late, anyhow."

The overture was nearly finished. Blake despairingly swallowed the insinuations, but declared Mrs. Granger innocent of any part in the matter. She did not even know of Mrs. Turner's appearance, but was at this moment helping the maids in reducing the rouge on the cheeks of her loyal friend and admirer, Mrs. Ross, of the infantry, who was to appear as the Marquise de St. Maur. Blake fairly pleaded with Mrs. Turner, but she was inexorable and even angry. He thought for a moment of summoning Mrs. Atherton behind the scenes to exert her influence, but by this time it was much after eight, and a moment's reflection convinced him that, after all, it was best to let her have her way; she could not change now inside of half an hour, and, if she were compelled to, would be apt to ruin the performance in some other way. In despera-

tion he turned and rushed across the stage, where he and Mr. Heath, all ready to go on as "Gerridge," had a moment's sympathetic but explosive conference, and then he summoned "D'Alroy," and, with wrath in his heart, rang up the curtain.

"Not as single spies, but in battalions," he raved, as "D'Alroy" nearly upset him in his precipitate retreat after the mishap to the curtain. "It's bad enough at the start; what will the ending be?"

In this moment of his bitter vexation and annoyance a soft white hand, a hand from which all the jewels had been removed, was laid upon his arm, and that lovely, beaming face, all smiles and confidence, looked up into his troubled eyes.

"Don't worry, Gerald; we'll *make* this a success. Do you think I'd let it be a failure when it means so much to you?"

"What a trump you are!" he muttered, hoarsely, longing yet not daring to meet the look in her eyes. They were at the second entrance on the right of the stage at the instant, and Dana had rushed beyond. In the confusion and excitement they were actually unobserved. "'Pon my soul, I could give it up in disgust if you weren't here to stand by me!"

"Don't you know I would do that always,—now, Gerald?" she softly murmured, gazing one moment into his face, then lowering the white lids until the lashes swept her flushed cheeks.

"All ready, Mr. Blake!" shouted the prompter.

"Let her go, then, quick! Come, Dana." But then a fatal impulse seized him and he turned. Both her white hands were quickly outstretched to him, and

grasping, he raised them with sudden movement to his burning lips. For the first time in years she heard the half-stifled, the longing, passionate cry,—"Madeleine!"—and then he sprang away. But she stood there, a smile of triumph on her face, as, a moment later, "Hautree" dawdled out upon the stage, his heart bounding in his breast.

Who in all that audience dreamed of the wheels within wheels, the drama within a drama enacted behind that dingy canvas screen? Who could have said only a few moments later that the laughing, romping, rosy-cheeked girl, dancing in through the flimsy door-way, her white teeth flashing, her shapely feet pirouetting, her lovely face smiling pertly up into "Hautree's" bewildered visage, was whispering wantonly to herself, "He loves me! He loves me! I have won him back again."

The town coterie had applauded vigorously at her entrance; the fort had affably seconded, but a laughing nod was the only recognition. Her silvery voice rang out clear and resonant, compelling their sudden silence. She was through with the brief introductory scene in a moment, and then with infinite gusto fell to chaffing "Hautree." There was a shout of delight from the rear of the hall when "Polly" refused to recognize his rank, scouted the idea of his appearing in that house as a captain, and bade him be corporal or nothing. The children shrieked with merriment over the by-play, where she made him take the kettle by the spout, and there was a rapturous burst of applause from the entire audience when she ordered her now obedient slave to face the door-way, and then commanded, "Forward march!" From that instant the interest of the crowded

throng centred on her, and the tailor-made gown, the lackadaisical tremor in Mrs. Turner's voice, the plaintive melancholy in her pretty face were all ineffectual. Not until "Polly" re-entered was there more than a ripple of sympathy or applause, and at the closing scene, just after "D'Alroy" had implored "Esther" to be his wife, and Mrs. Turner had thereupon bestowed a liberal allowance of rouge and powder upon the left shoulder of his cutaway, which led to a jovial clapping of hands in the body of the house, it was "Polly" upon whom all eyes were centred as "Eccles" came staggering in. The dash she made to pull down the curtain and hide the sight from the eyes of her *bourgeois* lover, "Gerridge," simply carried everything by storm. She would have remained in the rear of the stage at the tumultuous recall, Mrs. Turner bowing and smirking at the foot-lights with "D'Alroy" at her side, but louder and louder rang the applause, and Blake from behind the scenes shouted to "Eccles" to lead her to the front, and not until then were Mrs. Morris's roses launched at her feet. There was no mistaking for whom they were intended, and "Eccles" scored another hit by the inimitable manner in which he first picked up the flowers, then his hat, and eventually himself. Mrs. Turner's share of the spoils was a little bunch of carnations.

"Isn't she wonderful?" "Whoever dreamed she was such an actress?" were the remarks flying from lip to lip, during the interval between the acts. The ladies from the fort were evidently taken by surprise, while those from town were serenely superior and triumphant: they knew all about it, as Mrs. Morris

promptly claimed. In the general sensation poor Mrs. Turner was totally forgotten. Even the tailor-made gown seemed to escape comment. The orchestra was now playing—introduction and all—one of Strauss's loveliest waltzes, but the buzz of tongues fairly drowned the melody. Mrs. Freeman had turned and was chatting in low murmur with Mrs. Truscott. Here, at least, was a small section of the audience where the applause had been somewhat less enthusiastic. Jack, bending over behind his wife, beckoned Ray closer.

"Billy, will you see Mrs. Truscott to the colonel's when the play is out? I will be busy a while."

"Anything wrong, Jack?"

"Granger's driver, the new one, was assaulted down at the stables. Nobody knows by whom. He says two men were concerned: one of them wore a soldier's overcoat."

"Nobody else see it?"

"Not a soul. The Grangers came very early, and the quartermaster's stable was deserted. The sentry finally heard his cries, but got there too late. He's badly battered, and we took him over to the hospital."

"Reckon he must have some suspicion, hasn't he?"

"Yes; he says Grimsby, the discharged man, was the only enemy he had, and no one has seen Grimsby around the post since yesterday. Some of Freeman's men got into an altercation over the matter with the drivers who came out from town, and there came near being a fracas. I'll tell you more next intermission," he closed, as the ladies ceased their chat, and Mrs. Truscott leaned back in her seat.

But if Mrs. Granger scored a success in the first act,

it was nothing in comparison with the whirlwind of triumph that attended her at the close of the second. In the scene with "Hautree," when he appears in the uniform of the heavy dragoon, even the other characters on the stage, "D'Alroy" and "Esther," seemed utterly to forget their rôles and lose themselves in unwonted admiration of the vivacious "Polly." Nothing in all their rehearsals had prepared them for such a revelation of dramatic power. Her ringing, infectious laughter; her irresistible fun; her simulated awe at the appearance of the two dragoons in their regimentals; her caperings about the stage, as though mounted astride a prancing charger; her capital imitation of the colonel's word of command, as she flourished her folded parasol sabre-fashion; her perfect execution of the cuts and thrusts ("Gad! she's had hours of Blake's coaching there," whispered Wilkins); and then the grandiloquent address, delivered as though seated in the saddle in front of listening battalions, with all manner of *sotto voce* appeals to her imaginary steed to stand still, and the interpolated business of almost toppling out of her seat at times and frantic clutchings at her charger's mane and clasping of her arms about the invisible neck. It was simply inimitable. Even Blake could hardly restrain his delight.

"Why don't you gallop in on horseback like they do at Astley's? Look at me!" she cried, prancing up and down and curvetting across the stage. "Soldiers of France, the eyes of Europe are a-looking at you. The emperor has confidence in you, and expects that every man will do his utmost. The enemy is before you,—worse luck! Your comrades are behind you,—all the

better for them! Go and get killed for France and glory, and to those who escape the emperor will give a little bit of ribbon. Raise sabaw! Carree sabaw! Battalio-o-n ha-a-alt! Present sabaw! Carree sabaw! Forward; trot; ma-a-a-rch! Gallop; ma-a-a-rch! Steadee there in the *centre!* Look where you're going, Finnigan! Dress back there, Maloney! Wait for the next command. Now, lads. Touch boot to the *cen*tre, *cha-a-a-a-rge!*" And at that final charge, as she dashed across the stage, her parasol at tierce point, making directly at "Hautree," officers and hundreds of men sprang to their feet, shouting "Bravo!" or cheering vociferously. Time and again she had to come forward, breathless, bowing, smiling, looking so sweetly surprised, so unaffectedly grateful at all this demonstration in her honor, Mrs. Turner the while standing helplessly biting her lips and forgetting utterly her own "stage business" in envious contemplation of her now triumphant rival. It was full three minutes before the play could go on, and "Madame la Marquise" twice essayed an entry, only to be driven back by renewed tumult in front. And at last, when the act was finished and the curtain finally went down, after two enthusiastic recalls, in which "Polly" was again showered with roses and carnations, people took a long, long breath and turned to one another.

"That one scene," said the colonel, "would cover a thousand defects!" and publicly he rose and offered his hand to Granger, who was being overwhelmed with compliment and congratulation. Then came a message from the green-room to Captain Turner: Mrs. Turner was feeling far from well; wouldn't he please come to her?

This intermission proved of unusual length. "Mrs George D'Alroy" should have changed her costume here as she had between the first and second acts, for now she was to represent the impoverished widow. But such was the sense of overwhelming defeat and disappointment, such her bitter consciousness of inferiority to her rival, that poor Mrs. Turner was indeed sick at heart and wanted to go home. In vain Blake, Ross, and Dana implored: it was all useless. In vain Mrs. Granger and Mrs. Ross offered feminine comfort and ministration. She declared it simply impossible to go on again. She was blind with raging headache and too dizzy to stand. Somebody would have to read her part. Then Blake bethought himself of Turner; and that solemn-faced soldier appeared upon the scene and took in the situation at a glance. Deeply though he sorrowed for her in the depths of her woman's woe, he couldn't sanction defection now. He knew full well the cause of her sudden prostration.

"You've simply got to finish, Fanny," he said, in low, stern tone. "I will not allow you to ruin the thing now." And so the despairing lady bounced up to the mirror, and between sobs and reproaches began obliterating the tear-furrows from the flush of her cheeks and renewing the carmine of her twitching lips. Mr. Blake must at least announce to the audience that she was desperately ill, but, determined not to disappoint her friends, she would stick to her part. Blake, hastily doffing the dragoon dress at this moment in his little dressing-closet on the O. P. side, was duly notified by Turner of her decision.

"Well, you tell the orchestra to keep on," he shouted;

"and tell the prompter to raise the curtain the moment the music stops. I'll make the announcement."

Turner hastened forth to do his bidding, stopping one instant at the door of the ladies' dressing-room. Then came a misinterpretation of orders. Blake had just thrust his long legs into the black trousers of his evening suit and his head and arms through their appropriate channels in the dress-shirt, when the assistants, setting the stage for the third act, drove the cottage piano against one of the wings, and the big framework came toppling over on his canvas den. There was just time to spring from under, and, with the suspenders of his trousers dangling about his heels, a waistcoat in one hand, a collar and white tie in the other, and the shirt hanging *au naturel* between, Blake had bolted out on the stage, and, utterly engrossed in directions as to repairing damages, never noted the sudden stop of the music, never marked the simultaneous rise of the curtain, never realized the situation until a roar of laughter and frantic and delighted applause saluted his astonished ears. One amazed glance over his shoulder; one wild leap to "L. 3 E.," and he was out of sight, but far from out of hearing. The curtain was rung down amidst continued roars of laughter. The orchestra was bidden to blaze away again, and the half-hour interlude proved by long odds the merriest episode of the evening. When next, immaculate in evening dress, with his monocle dangling from his forefinger, the stage-manager squeezed through the narrow aperture at the prompter's side, and appeared before the foot-lights, the shouts and stampings and hand-clappings were renewed, and Blake stood there

bowing and laughing, and, for a time, vainly signalling for silence. Eventually they let him speak.

"It is with infinite regret the management is compelled to announce the serious indisposition of our fair leading lady, Mrs. Turner, who has been suffering ever since the performance began; but such is her spirit and determination that she refuses to succumb, and will finish the play. (Prompt and sympathetic applause, led by Mrs. Atherton.) The management feels it due to her, however, that so cultured and appreciative an audience should be fully informed of the misfortune which has befallen us all, and to bespeak for itself a moiety of that kindly consideration so readily extended to her. We are keenly conscious (and here his face assumed its expression of preternatural gloom) of our many dramatic shirt-comings,—I—I—mean short-comings (shouts of laughter), yet we find modified comfort in the reflection that t-there can be now no warrant for referring to our effort as a shiftless performance (more laughter), especially in view of the recent and-er-unlooked-for accession to our —ahem—che*mise-en-scene*."

He vanished amidst a chorus of groans, laughter, and applause.

"I wish I had a cabbage to throw at him," growled Carroll, who hated Blake.

"Take off your head, me boy," chuckled Wilkins. "Faith! we'd die of the dumps if we were all like you. Whist! Look at the orderly! He's got a telegram!"

The trumpeter of the guard was making his way down the aisle towards the commanding officer, a tall civilian following; and Stannard, first catching sight

of them as they reached the colonel's row, stretched forth his hand, took the despatch, and handed it to Atherton, who opened and read it without change of countenance, yet looked up inquiringly, nodded to the civilian, spoke a word in low tone to his wife, then rose and made his way to the aisle.

"Your office here being closed," said the messenger, "Laramie called us up in town, and the despatch was so important I got a horse and rode right out."

"Thank you," answered the colonel. "Let me have two blanks and your pencil a moment." All over the crowded audience dozens of anxious faces watched him as he quickly wrote a few lines on each blank, handed them to the messenger, saying, "Please get those off at once." Then on his way back to his seat, just as the curtain was rising for the third act, he met the inquiring eyes of his adjutant, simply shook his head, and stowed the despatch away in the breast-pocket of his coat.

But everybody knew that only for some matter of urgent importance would messengers be sent out from town at that hour of the night, and it was this that tempered the ovation to Blake and to Mrs. Granger at the final drop of the curtain, and afterwards as the ladies flocked about her when she came forth from behind the scenes.

Almost everybody had been bidden to the Athertons' for creature comfort after the play, and thither now many groups were strolling across the white parade. Snow-clouds had gathered, and a fleecy veil covered the face of the country far as eye could see. The moon was hidden, yet her light seemed diffused by the

softly-drifting crystals. Carriages and a 'bus or two were loading up for town. Others stood waiting over by the colonel's gate. Mr. Billings, leaving his better half with Royce, had quickly joined his chief in response to a signal, and Atherton and his adjutant stepped to one side.

At this moment there came forth the heroine of the evening, leaning on her husband's arm, and with all becoming modesty, with frank and joyous acceptance of their congratulations, Mrs. Granger was striving to reply to the host of admirers of both sexes who hovered about her. Blake, following closely and muffled up to the chin in his big overcoat, was laughing, ranting, shaking hands with every man who came up to felicitate him on the great success of the play, and his own happy way of getting out of a comical scrape. He, at least, had seen nothing of the arrival of the messenger from town, and had no premonition of stirring news. Just as the young assistant-surgeon was bowing over Mrs. Granger's extended hand and bidding her good-night, the voice of the adjutant was heard.

"Has Dr. Wright gone?"

"No, Billings, here! what is it?" asked Wright, straightening up at once.

"Orders for you to start for Powder River at dawn. There's been a fight up near the cantonment."

"Hah, physician, heel thyself!" shouted Blake, never at a loss for a misquotation. "Shall I lend you my Smith & Wessons?"

"You'll need 'em yourself, old man," said Billings, in lower tone. "A detachment of twenty men go at same time,—you in command."

CHAPTER XIV.

For ten minutes, at least, hardly anything was spoken of at the colonel's but the fact that Tommy Hollis had had a fight with the Indians and was painfully, yet not dangerously, wounded. "They must have hit him in the head," proclaimed Mrs. Wilkins, who never lost a chance of a whack at Tommy. Indeed, Bob Royce was heard to mutter under his heavy moustache, "Well, well, well; a fool for luck." And yet Hollis was genuinely popular, and, despite the blunders which often exasperated the men, and the devotions to one not of their number which gave umbrage to the women, had hosts of friends in the regiment; even Mrs. Wilkins liked him for his goodness of heart and willingness to oblige, but she thoroughly hated Mrs. Granger and could not forgive it in Hollis that he should have become her slave. As for Blake, the depth of her indignation knew no bounds; she was only bottling her vengeance, nursing her wrath, and waiting for some favorable moment in which to explode it with telling effect.

Mrs. Granger's brilliant success of the evening had only served to intensify the feeling the honest woman had so vehemently cherished against her. Even while struck with unwonted admiration of her histrionic powers, not for one instant would Mrs. Wilkins be

guilty of the weakness of joining in the congratulations and compliments showered upon the belle of the evening. She even went so far during a lull in the conversation as to distinctly aver in the hearing of Mrs. Granger that, when she saw "Caste" played in New York, the leading lady dressed and acted it very much as Mrs. Turner did. "What a pity she was taken ill! If it hadn't been for that the play would have been such a success." Not by the faintest tremor in her voice did Mrs. Granger show she felt the stab, but with prompt sympathy she was heard to say that nothing could have been more unfortunate, for Mrs. Turner had done beautifully at the rehearsals and they had all so depended upon her; and Mrs. Wilkins raged inwardly at the dead failure of her missiles. "I might as well shoot bow-arrows at an ironclad," she muttered to Mrs. Billings, who happened to be alongside at the moment. "Just wait till I catch Blake; it's him that will squirm." And, surely enough, not ten minutes later the onset occurred.

Blake was in the wildest and most uncontrollable spirits. The news that he was to march at dawn to take the place of Lieutenant Hollis was known throughout the entire company before they had been within the colonel's doors a minute. Everybody was crowding around, mingling congratulations on his success of the evening, with regrets at his enforced departure. Mrs. Granger had heard it on the way over as she strolled along, leaning upon her husband's arm, laughing, chatting, and most graciously receiving the compliments lavished upon her. Blake, after two minutes brief converse with the adjutant, had gone striding after her

fast as his long legs could carry him, and overtook the group surrounding her within a hundred yards of the colonel's gate. She never appeared to notice either his temporary absence or his return, but the very moment after his voice was heard in jovial reply to the commiseration of some of the party upon his sudden orders, she turned to Granger:

"You have my fan in your pocket, dear?"

"I? no! you never gave it to me."

"How utterly careless of me!—and it is that beauty you bought for me in Paris! I must have left it in the dressing-room. Let us go back at once."

"Oh, there's no need of your going," he answered, grimly. "I can find it easy enough—if it's there," he added, with odd significance.

One or two young officers proffered their services, but she would trouble no one. Major Granger knew the fan, and Major Granger went. Another moment and, still keeping up her bright converse with the ladies around her, she had quietly but possessively taken Blake's arm. All the rest of the way, even to the very door, she laughed and chatted, but there she hung back a moment as though looking for her lord. The group passed within the hospitable portals. Others were coming. Billy Ray's glad voice and Mrs. Truscott's merry laugh were heard just beyond the hedge. There was barely an instant, but in that instant she had clung to his side and looked wildly up into his face.

"Gerald! Gerald! tell me it is not true; you're not going, not now, not now—when——" and here she stopped abruptly, bowing her queenly head as though shame-stricken.

"Yes, at day-break," he answered low.

"O my God!" he heard her murmur, as she drooped until the white forehead rested in the fur lapel of his heavy coat. "And I cannot see you—cannot tell you, Gerald?" she implored, looking quickly, eagerly again up into his face. "Where can I write to you? I must write!—and you address me under cover to Mrs. Morris. Quick! they're coming."

Freeman and his wife, Nannie Bryan, Mrs. Truscott, and Ray came laughing through the narrow gate-way at the moment. The Stannards were just behind them. Too late now, whatever that "quick!" may have meant, for her lovely face was upturned to his when she said it. At the sound of footsteps on the creaking board-walk, D'Orsay promptly reopened the door, and in the broad streak of light Blake was revealed, bending double in his effort to find a dropped glove.

"There it is!" cried Mrs. Granger, blithely. "Ah, good people, we beat you by just a neck. Have you heard that Mr. Hollis was wounded? Mr. Ray, I condole with you—a fight and you not in it." And so, laughing and talking joyously, she passed with them into the brightly-lighted hall.

For an hour she was the centre of an admiring throng in the Athertons' parlor. Never had she seemed more gracious, winning, unaffected. The missing fan was found midway between the theatre and the colonel's gate. Granger had tendered it without a word of any kind, and then eagerly assented to a proposition to take a hand at whist with some of the elders in the colonel's den. Blake hovered about her,

watchful of every glance. His eyes were snapping with excitement; a deep flush was on his cheek; his voice and laughter rang through the crowded rooms. Man after man, woman after woman came to congratulate him on the success of the theatricals and his own exploit as manager, and to say how they mourned his having to leave at such a time. To one and all he made laughing, often ranting reply; but never for a moment did he lose sight of her. At last "the Wilkinses" approached to bid their hostess good-night, and Mrs. Wilkins had had just enough champagne to develop her imp of antagonism to its full extent. She stopped in front of Mrs. Granger and held forth her pudgy hand and looked that lovely matron straight in the eyes.

"Good-night, Mrs. Granger. Sure, I'm glad for your sake you have two strings to your bow—now that Blake has to go, you won't be long without Tommy."

People fairly gasped at the absolute insolence of her manner. Even those who had known her for years and remembered how she had braved woman after woman who strove to patronize her, stood aghast now at this performance. For one instant Mrs. Granger paled and faltered. It was Blake who came to the rescue. He had been closely watching Mrs. Wilkins and felt sure that mischief was brewing.

"Two strings on her bow! Only two? Nay, thou paragon of women, say, rather, two beaux on her string, with a dozen to fall back on if Tommy or I fall off."

"Faith, she won't break her heart saying good-by to

you, Mr. Blake; neither will I. It's high time you were going."

"Then farewell, fair Cruelty," ranted Blake, with melodramatic play of every feature, though his heart raged with wrath against her. Mrs. Granger's silvery laughter—glad and infectious—rang through the room in a jubilant peal. People could not help joining in. What better way was there of covering a scene so awkward as this might have been? It only made Mrs. Wilkins more furious.

"I'm not bidding *you* good-by, Mr. Blake; I'll be up to give you my parting blessing as you march, and a hint or two to take along." And she nodded significantly as Wilkins tugged at her buxom arm.

"Joy! joy indeed! thou queen of hearts! What!

> "Wilt thou see me ride?
> And when I am o' horseback I will swear
> I love thee infinitely,"

he declaimed, as amidst shouts of laughter Wilkins led her away. But there was a lull when she had gone. Blake's face was flushed, his forehead beaded, and Mrs. Granger's cheeks were burning.

Half an hour later the major finished his rubber and came in search of his radiant wife. Most of the party had gone home, but she was still surrounded by a little coterie, eagerly talking over the play, and deftly questioning her as to how or where she had acquired such proficiency.

"There was a time," she frankly said, "when I seriously thought of going on the stage, and I had been studying over a year when I married Major

Granger. It was that that put an end to it. You know my father was a naval officer who had to live up to every cent of his pay, as we all do, and I would have had nothing when he was taken from me. With the instruction I received I could support myself at any time."

It was then that Granger came in and said it was time to go, and she received a good-night from the women that was in itself another social triumph. Presently, as she came down-stairs, hooded and cloaked, and was escorted by a little procession to the carriage, the colonel had offered her his arm; the ladies thronged the door-way and hall; Granger, Blake, Clark, and Royce followed to the gate, and there sat the driver with a bandaged head.

"What's the trouble, Reilly?" asked Granger, stopping suddenly.

"Nothing serious, sir," promptly spoke Captain Truscott, who was standing by the forward axle. "There was a fight between the drivers at the stables. He's all right, and we had him patched up over at the hospital. I will tell you all we know in the morning."

But even there men could see that Granger hesitated, hung back, and trembled. His wife was handed in, and Blake stepped quickly around to her side at the open landau. She stole her hand from under the heavy robes and it was seized in both of his. She bent low one instant and whispered,—

"Gerald, Gerald, come back to me."

They bundled Granger in, as he seemed still hesitant; banged to the door, and Truscott's voice, low-toned but emphatic, was heard saying, "Go on."

As soon as the carriage disappeared in the darkness the colonel turned to his officer of the day:

"Come in, Truscott, I want to hear what has happened. Mr. Blake, I will say good-by, as you doubtless have preparations to make; the adjutant will give you your instructions when you start."

And Atherton extended his hand, which Blake took, held one instant as though he wished to say something, then released with a formal "Good-by, sir. I'll see you fellows later," he added, as he turned away.

Five hours more and a little column of cavalrymen riding by twos, dressed in buffalo overcoats, fur caps, fur gauntlets, leggings, and heavy "arctics," went winding away against the white background of the northern divide. Nannie Bryan, sitting at the little dormer window of the back room in Freeman's quarters, while the children were still peacefully sleeping, watched them until they were out of sight and then crept back to bed again and hid her face in the pillow.

Almost everybody was late putting in an appearance that cold, sparkling morning. The prairie and the broad parade were dazzlingly white in the unclouded sunshine. The guard was mounted without the band, and in heavy overcoats, fur caps and gauntlets. Captain Truscott, as old officer of the day, and Mr. Billings, the adjutant, had to be out at eight o'clock, and, indeed, they had been up and out before the dawn to see Blake well started; and Mrs. Wilkins—true to her promise—was astir as soon as anybody, and had some steaming hot coffee ready for Blake and his friends as they were going down to the stables. Blake, still wrathful, would have avoided her if he could have done so, but there

was no circumventing a woman of her determination. She suddenly opened the door as they came laughing down the gravel walk and bade them enter at once—coffee was all ready, and, as Truscott and Billings were glad to accept her hospitality, Blake simply had to go with them; but he took good care that she had no chance to convey the hint or two she had promised him, and they parted with every show of amity.

Turner, who was new officer of the day, appeared only just as the trumpets began to sound the troop. Mrs. Turner, he explained, had been so ill all night that he had no sleep until towards morning. A new prisoner stood among those at the guard-house as the old and new officers of the day appeared, and Turner looked curiously at him; he was in civilian dress and wore a heavy frieze overcoat.

"Who's that?" he asked of Truscott, as they approached the guard.

"A deserter from the infantry. He was mixed up in the row last night, and Sergeant Carmody recognized him."

Taking the report-book from the officer of the guard, Captain Truscott called over the list of prisoners. Each in answering to his name stepped one pace forward. Finally he came to the last on the page. "Howell," he called. No answer. The man in civilian dress stood fast and simply eyed the tall captain.

"Answer to your name, sir," said Truscott, with the grave, quiet dignity his men so well knew.

"That isn't my name," was the prompt, but surly reply.

"It is the name by which you were known in the —d Infantry a year ago," was Truscott's answer, in the same quiet tone. "You were recognized by Sergeant Carmody and two other men who served with you at Fort Steele, where you are said to have deserted."

"I never saw the sergeant before in my life. I was never in the army, and I am held here against the laws of the land. Somebody'll pay for it as soon as I can consult a lawyer." The men in the old and new guard stood like statues, hardly breathing as they listened to this strange colloquy. The few prisoners—half a dozen soldiers undergoing sentence or awaiting trial—glanced furtively at one another and eagerly at their new associate; one of them put his hand up to his face and grinned and whispered to his next neighbor, as the stranger made his threats.

"Who recognized this man besides yourself, Sergeant Carmody?" asked the old officer of the day of a tall soldier who stood respectfully by.

"Higgins and Walters, sir; both of them were at Steele while he was there. I was up there four days as witness before a general court. Higgins was a private in the —d Infantry then, and had known him a year. Walters was in the Second Cavalry and saw him every day for nearly a month. He has grown a beard, sir, but I can't be mistaken in him. I knew him the moment I set eyes on him last night driving Boynton's team."

Truscott turned again to the prisoner

"If you were not in the service at Fort Steele you will certainly be able to establish an alibi. It is my duty to hold you until the commanding officer ex-

amines the case. You will probably have an opportunity of seeing him inside of half an hour. If your name is not Howell, what is it?"

"My name's—well, no matter what my name is; I don't care to have it appear on a guard-house list. You'll know what it is soon enough after I see my lawyer."

"Is there any one in town by whom you can prove the sergeant to be mistaken?" asked the captain, calmly ignoring the threatening manner of the prisoner. "I can probably save time for you by sending one of my men for him."

"There's one nearer than town that'll stand my friend," was the answer.

"And who is that?"

"Major Granger."

"Indeed! Then you will not have long to wait, sir; Major Granger will be out here this morning."

But the major did not come. At noon a messenger rode over to the fort with a note to the colonel—a charmingly-worded note, in which Mrs. Granger informed the commandant of the post that her husband had caught a cold and was advised by the doctor not to leave his room that day, and then she took occasion to thank him and dear Mrs. Atherton for the delightful time she had at their reception after the play.

The colonel sent for the alleged deserter and questioned him in the presence of the three troopers by whom he had been recognized. He stoutly protested that it was a case of mistaken identity. The three men as positively declared it could not be. Atherton pondered a moment.

"Well, sir, it appears to be three to one against you," he finally said, "and Major Granger cannot come. If you see fit to write him a note telling him of your predicament I will send it at once. If he knows you, as you claim, he can at least send a message to that effect. Will you write?"

The stranger looked furtively about him a moment, his eyes roving from window to window as though he longed to make a dash for one of them. Carmody noted it and edged a little to his right, so as to interpose his sturdy frame between the man and any possibility of escape. The guard, too, a wiry little trooper, gripped his carbine tighter and took a single step forward.

"If I write, it's to Major Granger; nobody else is to read it," was the answer that came.

"Nobody desires to," was the colonel's reply. "Mr. Billings, let this man sit at the sergeant-major's desk and write his note, and send a mounted orderly with it."

At three o'clock, when the orderly got back, he had ridden in the teeth of a rising gale; the sky was overcast; the snow began to drive again. The soldier dismounted opposite the colonel's gate and threw the reins over the post; his horse instantly swung his haunches around to meet the blast, and, with bowed head and his long black tail blowing between his legs, stood cowering before the storm. Atherton himself received the note at the door, read it, and sent for the officer of the guard.

"Mr. Royce" he said, "tell that prisoner Howell that Major Granger denies all knowledge of him.

And if this storm increases, take in all your sentries except those at the guard-house and stables at four o'clock. I will notify the officer of the day."

At four o'clock the snow was driving like a dense white cloud straight across the parade and down towards the east gate. It was all the men could do to make headway up the hill coming back from the stables. At retreat one could not see objects twenty feet away; one could not breathe facing the gale; no man could stand up unaided against it, and the roar of the blast was like that of a tornado. At 9.30 the orderly trumpeter poked the bell of his instrument out through the door-way of the adjutant's office and sounded tattoo; but no one heard except the sergeant-major. All military duties had been suspended, as though by tacit consent. The colonel sent no word, for his orderly simply could not have made his way around the garrison. It was time for the second relief of the guard to be posted at 10.30, and Royce told the corporal to take two men down to the stables and stay there with the old sentries all night. It was easy enough to scud before the gale, but impossible to get back. The sentries at the guard-house and stables had been drawn inside before dark. Many of the guard had gone without their supper rather than attempt to make their way against the hurricane to the barracks, not more than a hundred yards from them. It was a blizzard of the fiercest description. "No man," said Royce, "could live outdoors in so fearful a storm." And yet, in the midst of it all, somewhere about twelve at night, the cry went up at the guard-house that the prisoner Howell had escaped. He was gone, no one knew how or where.

CHAPTER XV.

To say that Mr. Royce was deeply concerned at the loss of his prisoner is putting it very mildly. In view of the possible doubt in the case, the colonel had decided not to confine the man in the cells. He was given a place to sleep, and plenty of warm blankets, in what was known as the garrison prisoners' room on the east side of the building. A big coal-stove stood in the middle of the large bare apartment and a wooden shelf or bunk extended around two adjacent sides. A single window at the east gave light to the room in the day-time, a swinging lantern at night. The members of the guard were gathered in a big room separated from this one only by a thin partition of boards, and most of them after nine o'clock were soundly sleeping. Mr. Royce was in the office, as it was called, a little box devoted to the use of the subaltern commanding the guard. It was boarded off on the ground floor of a tower-like structure that stood across the road in front of the guard-house and just at the edge of the parade. He was sprawled at full length on an iron bunk, rolled in his buffalo-robe and blankets, when the sergeant of the guard burst without ceremony into the dimly lighted room—blown in actually by the gale. He was almost exhausted by the effort to cross that twenty-yard space. As soon as he could recover breath he gasped,—

"Lieutenant, that man Howell's got away!"

Royce bounded to his feet, pulled his fur cap down over his ears and eyes, and then, grasping hands, the two men plunged out into the thick of the tempest. So dense was the driving snow that the lights in the guard-house window could not be distinguished. The very first stride took Royce off his feet, and, but for the firm clasp of the big trooper, he would have been blown like a chip down the howling path of the storm. Bending double, they pushed across the hard, dry roadway swept clear of snow by the force of the gale, the sergeant edging a little to the windward and towing his slight but plucky commander under his wing, and presently they were whirled up against the wooden portico and drawn inside by alert members of the guard, every one of whom was now awake and excited. The sentry, pacing the corridor in front of the prison room, threw his carbine to "arms port" as Royce panted his first question.

"Indeed, sir, I'm as innocent of his escape as the babe unborn. You couldn't hear a thing, sir, but the roar of the storm; and the lamp was so dim I couldn't see anything going on."

Royce kicked open the grated door-way and went in. The two garrison prisoners who were confined awaiting trial started to roll out of their blankets and stand attention. "Lie still, you men," said the officer of the guard, for, despite the big stove nearly red-hot at the globe, the bitter cold came driving through every cranny and chink, and a big mound of snow had already formed under the open window. Where Howell had made his roost for the night the blankets

were artistically rolled so as to look as though a man were still there, but one bar at the aperture had been sawed through, two others bent back; the glass was cut out without so much as a jagged point anywhere. It was all the work of an expert, and not a trace had he left behind. The two prisoners solemnly declared they were sound asleep and never knew that he had gone until aroused by the cold and snow; then they had promptly informed the sentry. Royce turned abruptly and made his way to the porch through the groups of eager and excited men, and, in the twinkling of an eye, was whisked by the blast to the east side. Already the snow was banked to a height of eight feet, and had reached the sill of the square window through which the man had forced his way. Every trace was obliterated, all was utter darkness ten feet from the building, all a mad whirl of wind and snow. It was useless to pursue; it was impossible to notify either the commanding officer or the officer of the day. A stalwart corporal who essayed to cross the parade was speedily overcome and blown down to the quarters of "B" troop, where he gladly took refuge for the rest of the night.

When morning came the gale was at its height, the storm of snow dense and impenetrable. The roadway and the parade were swept clean, but the lee side of every building was banked to the eaves in solid drifts. Not a trumpet call was sounded, for none could have been heard. Communication with town was impossible, for the telegraph wires were down. The first sergeants of the various troops picked out a squad of three or four stout men, loaded them with bread and bacon, and sent them scudding before the gale down to the

stables in the valley, with orders to stay and help the orderlies there. The officer of the day, bending double and pulling himself along the picket fence hand over hand a couple of rods at a time, and then turning his back to the storm to recover breath, managed, after ten minutes' hard work, to reach the colonel's quarters, not a hundred yards from his own. The drifts were now on a level with the top of the piazza, but he managed to communicate with his chief. He did not know of Howell's escape. It was manifestly impossible to mount another guard, and Captain Turner was told to consider himself and his men on duty for another day, although no actual duty could be performed. The colonel's orderly, who had been relieved at retreat the previous evening, had not gone to the troop barracks at all, but slept in the kitchen. He was sure he could reach the guard-house all right, and so was sent with a note to Lieutenant Royce. He had no difficulty in starting, for the wind was blowing straight towards the tower, but he never could have stopped but for the merciful interposition of Providence and the guard-house, against which structure he was flattened out in the course of a minute, with hardly a sound bone, and certainly not a gasp of breath, left in his body. Royce and the sergeant lugged him in and brought him around by dint of some vigorous slapping and rubbing, but there was no such thing as getting him to try the back trip. A woman was ill down among the laundresses' quarters under the bluff, and the assistant surgeon, being anxious on her account, left his quarters and strove to make his way around by the east gate and the line of storehouses. He had no difficulty in

reaching the gate, but narrowly escaped being blown beyond and out on the wild prairie. Clinging to the fence, he crept until he reached the commissary storehouse, which was banked to the roof at the gable end; but he managed to bang at the side window of the office and was hauled in by the sergeant and his clerk. No one else ventured abroad. All that day, all the following night, the storm raged in fury. The back yards of the officers' quarters were filled with lowing cattle, driven before the blast from the ranges to the northwest, while hundreds more, unable to reach even such a port, were whirled along to the refuge of the town itself. The frail frame houses rocked and swayed as though any moment they might be torn from their anchorage and sent scattering through space, a cloud of drift-wood, clapboards, and shingles, and women and children, in not a few of them, clung together in dread and terror. Not until forty-eight hours after it began did the hurricane show the faintest sign of abatement, and then the troopers turned out; tunnels were dug under the drifts into the colonel's house and the adjutant's office. The second-story windows in many cases were used as means of egress by the occupants of the quarters along the row, and, by devious ways and many a *détour*, the garrison tramped around to the stables, to find the horses on the west side of the gangways standing three feet higher than usual on ramps of snow which they had trodden solid as it sifted in, but otherwise apparently well content with the situation. They had had plenty to eat and were not troubled with thirst. It was then that the colonel for the first time heard of the escape of the prisoner

Howell. He had now been gone some forty hours, and search or pursuit was useless. The snow had ceased entirely by retreat, and the order was given that the entire command should turn out on fatigue duty in the morning, equipped with shovels and any tools that could be utilized in clearing away the drifts.

And so, on the third day after the famous theatricals, the officers were gathered together for a comparison of notes and jocular greetings of one another after the enforced separation, and the colonel was standing the centre of a laughing, chatting, jolly group down in the creek valley, while the snow was being pitched out of the stalls, when, winding his way among the drifts and slowly nearing them, a horseman was seen coming along the edge of the bluff. At last he reached the party, and was recognized as an employé at the depot. Without a word, he handed the colonel a note, which the latter opened and read.

It was a characteristic of Atherton's that he never gave evidence by any word or sign of the nature of the information conveyed to him in this way. He read it, evidently, twice over, deliberately refolded and handed it to his adjutant, and then turned to the bearer:

"Have they inquired everywhere in town?"

"Yes, sir, everywhere, every place the major ever went to, and men have been to every ranch and shack anywhere around us; no one has seen anything of him since five o'clock Wednesday afternoon."

"Have they inquired all over the depot—in every employé's house?"

"Every one, sir, and all the stables have been searched, and storehouses. He didn't take out his horses at all;

they are there yet. Reilly was the last man who seen him, sir. He told Reilly at five o'clock that he might have to drive to town despite the storm, and told him to be ready in case he sent for him, but he never sent."

The laughter and chat among the officers had ceased. All were listening in silence to this significant colloquy. The colonel pondered for a moment.

"I will have an answer ready in quarter of an hour, if you can wait," he said. "Gentlemen, Major Granger has disappeared. He has not been seen since five o'clock Wednesday; but I trust he is only storm-bound somewhere near us. Captain Freeman, you spoke of sending a man up to Bryan's ranch to get some things for Nannie; I wish to send a note by him, if you will direct him to report to me. Captain Truscott, if you can conveniently do so, I wish you would ride down and see Mrs. Granger and inquire how we can be of service to her. Mrs. Atherton will go just as soon as we can find a road for an ambulance." And so saying, and with a gesture which called his adjutant to his side, the colonel strode away.

Truscott turned towards his troop stable to order a horse, and Mr. Ray followed, saying not a word.

"What do you think of it, major?" presently asked Mr. Carroll of Stannard.

"Oh, I don't know; he's probably in town somewhere, sick. He had a cold on Wednesday and has increased it."

"Then you think he'll turn up all right, do you?" pursued Mr. Carroll, when the major turned away as though unwilling to speak further upon the subject. "Well, I'd just like to bet Billy Ray doesn't think so,

and that if his brother-in-law, Rallston, were here there would be a different theory.

"You be blowed, Carroll!" was the impatient retort of one of his fellows. "You're forever dreaming melodrama."

But when Captain Truscott returned from his mission soon after dark and reported the result to the colonel, the latter ordered an ambulance sent up from the quartermaster's corral, and he and Mrs. Atherton, bundled in robes and furs, were driven away to the depot, guided by a couple of mounted men who carried hurricane lamps.

The train from the East was several hours late on Sunday, but Atherton was in town at the station to meet a staff-officer from department head-quarters, and together they drove out to the depot, where Mrs. Granger by this time was reported seriously ill, as the result of nervousness and anxiety. Her friend Mrs. Morris had come out from town, bringing with her a trained nurse, and Mrs. Atherton had returned to her home at the post, and was compelled by one lady friend after another to detail her experiences in the house of mourning. There was little to tell, despite the intricate system of cross-examination. Mrs. Granger could only say that after receiving the ill-looking note brought down by a mounted man from the fort, the major had insisted on getting up and writing a reply; that then he refused to lie down again, and presently had dressed and gone over to his office; had returned to his room for perhaps twenty minutes, during which time she had not seen him, and then, before she knew his purpose, he had gone forth again; this time in the teeth of the gale.

Reilly had seen him at five o'clock, and no one afterwards. It had grown very dark before six.

Meantime, Colonel Rand, of the staff, was busily turning over books, papers, examining the stubs of check-books, etc., in Granger's private office, and on Monday he came up to the fort and sent for Sergeant Carmody, and Troopers Higgins and Walker. He wanted an accurate description of the man Howell. He also got from the girl Annie a photograph of the English driver, Grimsby; and with these he started for Denver, after having carefully sealed the major's papers and locked them in a safe of which he kept the key. All this, of course, was soon noised abroad, and a thousand theories and speculations were rife. Several of the ladies went down to call at the depot and tender sympathy and condolence, but Mrs. Granger was now —so said Mrs. Morris—too ill to see anybody.

Late Monday afternoon the Laramie stage, instead of keeping the direct road to town, was descried coming in towards the garrison. The officers were just strolling up from stables; the driver tossed a note to the foremost group, and, without slackening speed, whirled off to the left, and the old red rattle-trap went rumbling and clattering off across the prairie. The note was to Freeman from Blake. The blizzard had struck them at Lodgepole Creek and compelled them to stay there under shelter until Saturday morning—barely a few hours' brisk ride from the fort. Then they had pushed on to the Chugwater, Eagle's Nest, and to Laramie, where he had to go for rations, instead of taking the shorter route to Fetterman, as had been his intention. The up-stage which passed them Sunday brought strange

tidings about Major Granger; what did it mean? "Wire the latest news to Fetterman to meet me Tuesday night or Wednesday morning."

And all that Freeman could telegraph when Tuesday came was, that Major Granger was still missing, and Mrs. Granger—he saw fit to add—was overwhelmed with grief and anxiety. Every effort had been made to find the missing officer meantime. A big force of men had levelled and searched through drift after drift at the depot, and now were exploring in the creek valley beyond. No trains had left the station in town, going in any direction, between 4 P.M. Wednesday and early Saturday morning, so he could not have gone away. The police, the detectives, a number of brother officers, and a corps of enterprising amateurs had all been engaged in the search, but to no avail. Blake telegraphed again from Fetterman on Wednesday, reporting that he was just starting for the cantonment on Powder River, begging that any news might be sent him by wire as far as it could go; and this message, coming to the house while Freeman was down at stables, was opened by his bonny wife, who sighed as she turned and placed it on the mantel-shelf, and then went into the dining-room where "Prairie Nan" was reading aloud to the children, and bent down and kissed her.

Snow disappears with singular rapidity on the plateaus and ridges of those high slopes to the east of the Rockies; it is only in the ravines and *coulées* that the drifts are so heavy as to withstand for a time the combined forces of the sun and the breeze. A week after the great storm began almost every vestige had faded from the prairie and around the buildings of the

supply depot, where the drifts had been levelled in the process of the search. Up at the fort huge mounds still stood on the east side of many of the quarters. People rather enjoyed the distinction of pointing them out, with their tunnels, to curious visitors from town; and, down in the creek valley, a narrow curving rift in the bald prairie, the snow was solid in every cross ravine, and heaped in massive hillocks at every turn and behind every projecting shoulder of bluff. The entire garrison at the fort had worked hard for a couple of days in dumping the snow out of the stables and in cleaning up generally. Then came forty-eight hours of clear skies and moonlit nights, and then, more snow.

It was Wednesday night. Freeman and Ray had been having a long talk in the latter's quarters, and it was all about Blake, whose telegram from Fetterman had arrived that day, and of Granger, of whom no tidings had been received at all. With all his love for Blake, no one had more sincerely rejoiced in the order that sent him far to the north than his once reckless boon companion, the Kentuckian; but so loyal was he to his friend that, though he trusted Freeman and thoroughly respected him, he would say no word that might lead the captain to infer that Blake's infatuation for Granger's beautiful wife had ever been a subject of comment between them. But it had; and a very serious talk it proved, though Blake took his comrade's hand and wrung it hard as they parted. Ray had been up to see him start with his little command and had ridden out a mile or so with him, so as to be the last to say good-by. Now he listened silently to what

Freeman had to say on the subject, and, when the captain finally bade him good-night, Ray followed to the door.

Through the veil of softly-falling snow the moonlight was diffused, cold and dim, yet of sufficient strength to reveal the outlines and shadows of the barracks, and to render moving objects visible across the parade. Glancing aloft, Ray could even see where hung the silver shield, peering through the fleecy clouds. A light mantle, glistening white, was spread over the ground. The sentries had just called off eleven o'clock as Freeman held out his hand:

"You have rather a better night for your rounds than Turner had a week ago, Billy."

"Yes, I hope I'll have better luck, too. Fancy losing a prisoner on that night of all others. I wonder what became of that fellow."

"Can't say. There was no one to interfere with his going wherever he wanted to.—Good-night, old man; pleasant dreams.—Oh, when you inspect, just poke your head into my stable, will you, and see if Sergeant Jamieson's back. He's been a little demoralized since that storm."

"So Royce was telling me."

"Yes; he claimed to know something about the drivers who started the row at the stables the night of the play, and I gave him a pass for town the next morning; there he was storm-bound until Friday night, but he didn't come home until Saturday morning. I could see he had been drinking, but he worked so well clearing out the stables that I said nothing. He got another pass from retreat to reveille for to-night,

but told me he'd be home by one o'clock. He went mounted."

"All right, captain, I'll look after him."

And so saying, Mr. Ray went back to the letter which he was blissfully writing when Freeman came in. This finished, he scrawled a few lines which he addressed to a Mr. Rallston, Omaha, and had just betaken himself to his big arm-chair, with the idea of having a snooze before sallying forth to visit the guard and sentries, when there came a heavy step upon the porch and a rap at the door. It was a corporal of the guard who entered at his call.

"The officer of the guard's compliments, sir, and Corporal Buck, just in from pass, says he saw a wagon with two men driving away from the magazine, and he thinks they've robbed it."

"Say I'll be over in a minute, and tell my stable sergeant to have Dandy saddled and sent up to the guard-house at once," answered Ray, as he pulled on his spurred riding-boots. Two minutes more and he was speeding across the parade.

The lights were out at the colonel's quarters and at most of those along the row. There was no use in disturbing anybody, and Ray decided to act on his own responsibility in the matter. He was the senior lieutenant of the regiment, commanding Captain Buxton's troop in the prolonged absence of that officer. The six troop commanders were performing officer-of-the-day duty, while the subalterns, though more numerous, took their turns as officer of the guard—a more exacting service, as, except when visiting sentries, they were required to remain at the tower night and day. A vast

quantity of ordnance stores, arms, ammunition, and equipments of every kind had been sent to the fort during and after the Sioux campaign, the officials of that most level-headed department finding it far easier to ship in bulk from the great arsenal in the East to that distant point, and saddle the labor and responsibility of their distribution upon some poor devil of a cavalry adjutant, already heavily burdened. When enough ammunition had been gathered there to blow the whole post to flinders, the colonel refused to allow it to be kept in the garrison storehouses. "It would simply stultify the efforts of the men in case of fire," he said, and he was perfectly right. A mile from the fort, out on the edge of the creek valley and near the big supply depot, stood a brick magazine. Thither had this great stack of ammunition been transported, and there for a time, night and day, had a corporal and three men of the guard been stationed. But the colonel would not subject his men to the bitter suffering of such duty in such weather, and, as their tent had been blown away by the gale, and they themselves landed, battered, breathless, and half frozen, among the storehouses at the depot, he refused to renew the guard.

In ten minutes Mr. Ray was loping eastward through the lightly-falling snow, and presently Dandy pulled up in front of the lonely little structure at the edge of the bluff. One glance revealed the truth. The door of boiler-iron had been wrenched from its hinges with crowbars and now hung by the huge padlock; the vault-like interior was gaping open to the night; a two-horse wagon had been loaded up and driven away, and, never hesitating a moment, Ray sped eastward, again

following the fast disappearing tracks. In quarter of an hour they would be snowed under completely. Around and to the north of the great quadrangle of the depot they led, and Dandy bounded in pursuit, rejoicing, evidently, in the novelty of this night gallop over the prairie. Straight away to the town they seemed to lead, once clear of the government grounds, and in less than ten minutes more Ray went cantering in through the silent streets of the northwestern suburbs of the frontier city, still following the trail. Twisting around one corner after another, it led into the heart of the town, and here the lights in the saloons, the strains of bacchanalian music, the shouts of midnight revellers, and the frequent passage to and fro of rumbling hacks, might well have thrown him off the trail. But Ray had his own suspicions, and two blocks farther he reined in beside a two-story frame building, on the lower floor of which was a general outfitting shop for ranchmen, miners, and prospectors; and though all was dark and apparently deserted, there were the recent tracks of a two-horse wagon that had driven close to the wooden sidewalk; there were the marks of many feet, leading from the point where it had stood to a gate-way in the high wooden fence behind. The wagon had driven away not ten minutes before he came, so he judged, and even as he sat there in saddle studying the situation, that back gate was slowly, cautiously opened, and a man's head appeared one instant, was withdrawn with marvellous speed, and rapid, shuffling footsteps were heard in the rear of the store. Quickly Ray touched Dandy with the spur, darted around to the front of the building, just in time to see a man throw himself into

saddle and go tearing away northward fast as a mettlesome horse could carry him. "After him, boy!" was the word; and the beautiful sorrel sped like a deer up the almost deserted street, and in a moment more the two were racing like mad over the snow-covered prairie, the leading horseman bending low over the pommel and gradually edging in a long sweeping circle around towards the eastern side of the town.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was barely midnight when, after brief questioning of the corporal who had reported the probable robbery, and a few words to Mr. Carroll, who was in command of the guard, Ray had ridden out across the snow-covered prairie, and now the sentries had called off half-past one o'clock; he had not returned, and Carroll began to grow decidedly anxious. Carroll was not a particularly brilliant officer, and in days gone by had seen fit to ally himself with the little clique of Ray-haters, composed of the lower element among the commissioned officers of the —th. But the events of the summer, especially of the campaign, had so firmly established the object of their dislike in the respect and affection of the regiment generally, that Crane was about the only man who ever ventured to display a vestige of the feeling that once existed, and, as for Carroll, he was heartily sorry that he had ever been led astray by the sneers and innuendoes of the men who happened to be his earliest associates in the regiment. He had grown to look upon Ray as the incarnation of all that was loyal, daring, and soldierly, and secretly he longed for some way of showing him his regret for the past and his hope for the future.

But Ray, it must be confessed, was not an easy man to "make up to," as he himself expressed it. He despised Crane, and was barely civil to those who asso-

ciated with him. It was this that led him to "Mr." two or three of the subalterns on all occasions, and never to admit them even to the outer court of comradeship, much less to that of intimacy. In civil life, in all the professions or avocations which do not confer a distinctive title like those of Judge or Doctor, men who desire to show respect to or for their associates rarely fail to use the prefix which in military circles, here or abroad, is the symbol of a very different feeling. When a subaltern officer is "mistered" by his comrades, it simply means that he is not one of them. Nothing would induce Ray to speak to Crane in any other way, and as Carroll had rather cast his lot with that luckless old growler in by-gone days, he was now finding it a difficult matter to cut loose. Blake, who was a leader among the elder subalterns, Bob Royce, who was a leader among the juniors, Dana, Hunter, and Hollis, who was everybody's friend,—indeed, Billings, the adjutant, and Clark, the quartermaster, had begun to be cordial to Carroll as soon as he showed a disposition to drop Crane and seek their companionship; but Ray had not forgiven it that the young man had seen fit to disregard good advice which he himself had given in Arizona, and had clung to Crane when he might have been with better men. Even on this night, therefore, as he rode away, the Kentuckian was cold and formal in his parting words: "I may be gone an hour, Mr. Carroll, and I leave you in charge," was all he cared to say. But now he had been gone over an hour and a half. The snow was falling thicker and thicker, utterly obscuring the pallid disk of the moon, and the officer of the guard, pacing restlessly up and down in

front of the tower, began to wonder if he ought not to go and arouse the colonel and tell him of Ray's prolonged absence.

Strictly speaking, he knew that the officer of the day had no business to leave the post at all; but, except on dark nights or very snowy ones, that magazine was "government property in view" of the sentry at the haystacks, at least, and was, therefore, within the charge of the guard. He did not doubt that the colonel would approve Ray's course in following the trail before the fast-falling snow could obliterate it forever, but he himself stood in so much awe of his post and regimental commander that he shrank from the idea of going over and awaking him in the dead of night and telling him the officer of the day had left the garrison. Two o'clock came and was duly called off by the sentries, and in the hush and silence of the windless night even the cry of the far-away No. 7—the easternmost post of all, at the haystacks down the valley—sounded clear and shrill to the listening ears on the bluff. Carroll's evident anxiety had infected his men, and the sergeant of the guard, with the corporal of the relief on post and one or two troopers, stood chatting in low tones under the shelter of the porch. Finally the sergeant stepped briskly across the road, and, bringing his fur gauntlet in salute to the barrel of his carbine, inquired,—

"I beg pardon, sir, but did the lieutenant go armed?"

"He wore his sabre, sergeant, and I presume he had his revolver. Mr. Ray has had too much experience on the frontier to undertake anything of this kind without his arms."

"Well, I asked, sir, because Corporal Lenihan says he did not see any holster on his belt, and a man would have little chance with any of that gang in town without his gun. The men say that the magazine was robbed before we came, and there's more than one place in town where they'll buy anything that can be stolen from here or the depot either."

"I can't think that Mr. Ray has got into trouble of any kind," answered Carroll, unwilling to allow the men to see how disturbed he was. "He would hardly attempt any arrest or capture without calling on the police for help, and then there must be a dozen of our men in on pass to-night, and they generally travel in squads."

"Ay, sir, but they are not permitted to go armed, whereas every tough and gambler and night prowler has a knife or pistol in every boot or sleeve or pocket. They know our fellows have nothing but their fists to depend on; that's why we have so much trouble. They'd be a heap more respectful if we were allowed our weapons. Indeed, sir, I wish two or three of us might ride in and see what's become of the lieutenant."

But this was more than Mr. Carroll felt authorized to allow unless backed by superior authority. He looked helplessly about him a moment; he could not make up his mind to arouse any of the senior officers of the garrison; they were all married, and banging or ringing at their doors would certainly disturb the women and children. Clark was a bachelor, and he did not mind routing him out, and he knew that a word would send him, with two or three comrades at his heels, galloping townwards in search of Ray. The

mysterious disappearance, too, of Major Granger had had its effect in adding to the fears that were possessing him, and he had just about made up his mind to stir up the bachelors' roost when two men appeared through the snow, their fur caps and heavy coats covered with the glistening white fleece, and, handing their passes to the sergeant of the guard, reported their return.

"Did you see or hear anything of Lieutenant Ray?" asked Carroll.

"No, sir," was the prompt reply of both, followed by an immediate and anxious question on part of one of them.

"What's wrong with the lieutenant, sir? I'm Hogan, his 'striker.'"

"Hogan? Were you on pass? Well, it's two hours since the lieutenant heard that the magazine had been robbed, and he rode away to investigate it. I'm afraid he's followed the trail to town."

"Then, for the love of God, sir, let me get a horse and go after him. There was something up, and I knowed it as we sat there in the Alhambra taking a drink, sir. There was three men a-sitting at a table near us, and presently another one came in and whispered to them, and they all got up and went out together in a hurry."

"What time was this?"

"Soon after twelve o'clock, sir. We had been to the show, and whin 'twas over, about eleven, Jerry here, who was with me, saw Sergeant Jamieson on horseback going up a side street, and ran after him. He wanted to borrow a dollar till pay-day; and while I was waiting at the corner two men comes running around, and one

of them says, 'That's him going now,' and the other spoke up and says, 'Wait till that damned blue-belly gets through with him.' And the moment I heard him speak I knowed 'twas Grimsby,—him that used to drive for Major Granger,—and I was for speaking to him, but the moment I stepped out into the light he turned and skipped around the corner where there was a buggy standing, and jumped in and drove off, whipping his horse; but I could swear it was him, sir. Sure he used to come to our quarters all the time by the back gate with letters for Loot'nint Blake. I know there's something wrong, sir," pleaded Hogan, his honest Irish face filled with anxiety and distress. "Can't I ride in with two or three of the boys?"

"May I ask Jerry—this other man here—a question, sir?" interposed the sergeant of the guard, hurriedly.

"Certainly; go ahead."

"What did Sergeant Jamieson say when you asked for the dollar, Murphy?"

"Well, furst he said no, he had no money to lend; but then I told him Hogan and I was broke, and he said, 'Is Hogan wid you?' says he, and after a little palaver he gave me a half-dollar and said he hadn't any more, but he'd lave an order at the half-way house for ould Peter to let us have what we wanted on our way home."

"Then he said he was coming right back, did he?" questioned Sergeant Malloy, significantly.

"He did, and he rode off at wonst like he was going back by the prairie road."

"And that's the way you came, was it?—out by the half-way house on the prairie?"

"It was. Sure we had his word for it that we was to have whatever we wanted there, but divil a soul could be raised. It was all dark and locked and barred, and nobody would come to us but the dog."

"And that's how you came to come home sober, was it, Murphy?" said the sergeant. "Well, you might have known better. Sergeant Jamieson and his horse are out yet, lieutenant; and it's my belief—but never mind, sir, I've no right to speak so."

"What do you mean? What are you driving at?" queried Carroll, sharply, as the other men stood in wondering silence.

"It's just this, sir," and the Irishman brought his furred gauntlet down with resounding whack on the butt of his carbine. "That cockney, Sergeant Jamieson, knows all about this night's work, or I'm a muttonhead."

And then, before another word could be said, from far down the creek valley, beyond the stables, beyond the haystacks, there came the faint, sharp crack of a pistol, followed presently by the louder report of a carbine and the shrill cry of the distant sentry, "Corporal of the Gua-a-a-r-d, Number Seven!" In an instant the members of the guard were tumbling out of their blankets and springing for the door in response to Malloy's hoarse shout, "Turn out the guard!" In the same instant Mr. Carroll, followed by the corporal and Hogan, made a rush for the edge of the bluff and went bounding down into the dark, snow-shrouded valley.

But it was a long, long run, and men bundled in heavy overcoats and furs, their feet encased in cum-

brous "arctics" over cavalry boots, were soon wearied. The corporal gave it up before they were half-way along the line of stables, and Carroll himself was panting heavily, while Hogan, unencumbered with belts or accoutrements, had stripped off his overcoat and thrown it aside as he ran, and was now speeding far ahead. The sentry on No. 5 challenged and ordered "Halt!" but Hogan yelled out his name and went spinning along through the snow veil to the utter bewilderment of the guardsman. The next moment Carroll staggered up almost exhausted.

"Go with him, No. 5," he panted; "there's trouble there; Corporal Lenihan will take your post."

And recognizing the officer of the guard, the sentry promptly darted away after Hogan. Meantime, other shots had been fired. The stable orderly at the corral, startled from a doze by the yell of the nearest sentry, heard the distant crack of the carbine, and, knowing that to be the signal for fire or immediate danger, rushed to the building in which slept the quartermaster's men, shouted "Fire!" at the top of his voice, threw open the doors of the shed in which the hook-and ladder truck was kept in readiness, and the next minute, as the employés, half dressed, came tumbling down into the night, they saw the dim forms of two or three men scudding eastward through the snow, and out rolled the light, rattling truck and went spinning after them fast as a dozen stalwart men could pull. The shout of fire was heard by the sentry at the storehouses on the bluff, who promptly let drive a shot in mid-air and echoed the cry; so did the sentry over behind officers' row; the trumpeter of "B" Troop was

dragged out of bed by a leather-lunged sergeant, who ordered him to hustle out there and sound the fire call, which the little scamp obeyed to the letter, going back for his boots and breeches only when he had routed out the entire garrison. In less than three minutes the various companies were standing in disciplined silence and solid ranks at their respective stations, waiting for orders, for in the absence of any sign of fire no one knew where to go. The colonel, who always seemed to sleep with one eye and both ears open, and who never went to bed without expecting an alarm of fire somewhere in his great tinder-box of a post, was at his station in the centre of the parade before most of the officers appeared, the adjutant and captains running directly to him for orders, while the subalterns sped across the level plain to join their companies. By this time all sound of shots or shouts had subsided, and as no officer of the day appeared to explain matters, the colonel marched briskly away towards the guard-house, most of his officers following. They were received in due form by the sergeant of the guard, who promptly said,—

"I don't think it's a fire at all, sir. The first alarm was a pistol shot, then a carbine and a yell for the corporal from No. 7. The officer of the guard with Corporal Lenihan ran at once, and it was after they got down into the valley that the cry of fire came from the corral, but there's no fire there, sir. I sent Corporal Preusser down at once. He came back and said the truck had run towards the haystacks, and he met the quartermaster as he was coming up the hill. No, sir; there's some other trouble. Corporal Buck came in at

midnight from pass and reported the magazine robbed, and Lieutenant Ray rode down to see about it, and he hasn't got back at all, sir."

"What time is it now?"

"Almost 2.30, sir."

"Gentlemen, hold your companies where they are for a moment. Major Stannard, you take charge.—Send a couple of men with me, sergeant." And so saying, the post commander, with his adjutant, trudged away to the bluff and was soon lost to sight in the darkness.

Down the slope, down past the open doors of the quartermaster's stables they ploughed their way through the thick, light fleece of snow. The watchman, excited and eager-eyed, touched his cap as they passed, but could tell nothing in response to their inquiry. Neither could the sentries on Nos. 5 and 6. It was not until they had gone nearly half a mile and were at the post of No. 7 among the haystacks, that a couple of lanterns came flitting like will-o'-the-wisps through the sifting veil, and presently they met the truckmen, dragging slowly back, chatting in low, excited tones.

"What was the matter, sergeant?" asked the colonel.

"I don't just know, sir; the officer of the day has a prisoner, and there's been some stealing at the magazine and stables. Sergeant Jamieson's shot, I believe, sir."

A few paces farther and they came upon another group, slowly approaching them. A two-horse wagon, loaded with sacks of oats, was being carefully guided by a couple of members of the guard, for lying on the sacks was a moaning cavalryman. Behind it came

Lieutenant Ray, the quartermaster, and the officer of the guard, while Hogan followed in their track leading Dandy, the only living being in the party apparently utterly unconcerned. It was the officer of the day the colonel accosted :

"What's the matter, Ray?"

"The magazine and Freeman's stables robbed, sir; Sergeant Jamieson shot in the leg and his horse killed. Rather a long story, colonel, as all three happened at different times and places."

And then a feeble voice, mingled with many a groan and imprecation, was heard from the wagon :

"I swear to God, Colonel Atherton, h'I'm—h'I'm hinnocent, sir. The officer of the day accused me of being a conspirator, 'e did, sir. I was shot doing my duty.—O God, men, go gently," he cried, as the springless wagon jolted across a little gully hidden under the snow.

"With your permission, colonel, I will send Hogan on Dandy for Dr. Pease, and have him examine Jamieson's hurt here at the stables, and then I can tell you what has taken place."

"Very good!—Hogan, give my compliments to Major Stannard and tell him to dismiss the command; you will find Dr. Pease with him, probably. Ask him to come down to the stables."

Ten minutes more, while the surgeon was looking after his patient at the front end of Freeman's stables, a little group was gathered under the open hatchway at the other, and, having unloaded their human freight, one or two men were tumbling the sacks of oats out of the wagon. Ray's story was briefly told. He had

long suspected the proprietors of a certain store as being receivers of property stolen from the post and depot; had followed the trail to within five blocks of the establishment, and, as he expressed it, his "nose the rest of the way;" had given chase to the man who escaped on horseback, and speedily realized that he could be no other than Freeman's English hussar stable sergeant on his pet horse "Cardigan," one of the fleetest in the —th Calvalry. Even through the falling film of snow, Ray was sure he could recognize the peculiar seat, and he knew well there was only one horse that could keep Dandy on a stern-chase more than a minute or two, even with so light a rider as Jamieson. Thrice he shouted his own name, and called to the sergeant to halt, and he thought his voice must have been heard and recognized. But the only answer seemed to be renewed spurring and fresh bursts of speed. A long circular sweep from the north of the town finally brought them over the prairie east of it, and here at last Ray knew he was gaining on his quarry. Again he shouted orders to pull up, and gave his own name; again the sergeant plied the spur and suddenly disappeared in the railway cut, whither Ray promptly followed, and, just as he expected, found the chase had striven to double on itself and had turned sharply to the right. But the Kentuckian and Dandy had not coursed Jack rabbits for nothing, and the Englishman's ruse only lost him his lead, and with it went his head, for, finding the pursuer almost upon him, he had whipped out a revolver and opened fire as he rode,—the last desperate resort of the hunted criminal.

Ray promptly swerved Dandy to the left, so as to bring him on the "near" side of the chase and so baffle his aim; but even as he turned he felt the wind of a bullet that zipped past his cheek. That was more than a Kentuckian could possibly be expected to stand, and out came his own trusty Colt. Jamieson turned in his saddle and fired again over his bridle-arm, deaf apparently to Ray's shouts to halt and surrender. Dandy swerved again at the sudden flash so near his nose, and his long springy stride became suddenly short and stiff-legged, and Ray, furious at the fear that his pet was shot and that the scoundrel of a sergeant might escape, aimed deliberately as he could, pulled trigger, heard a yell of pain and dismay from the chase, and then with a bound or two more Freeman's fleetest runner went plunging heavily to earth, hurling his rider into the snow. Ray and Dandy, carried by the impulse of their speed, went a dozen yards or more before they could come down to a trot and rein about in broad circle and return to the crippled and fallen foe. Springing from his horse and leaving him, heaving and panting, to recover breath, still warily covering the Englishman with his revolver, the officer closed upon him, took away the pistol that had fallen into half a foot of snow from an apparently lifeless hand, then laying hold of the coat-collar proceeded to drag him away from his plunging, stiffening charger, whereat Jamieson suddenly recovered consciousness and began to groan and swear and beg piteously for his life.

"Shut up, you infernal scoundrel!" was the unfeeling answer. "I'm not going to kill you, though you deserve it."

"Ho, my Gawd, if it isn't Lieutenant Ray! So help me 'eaven, sir, I thought it was some of the robbers."

"Shut up, I tell you. Don't lie to me. Here, stand up now. You've only got a clip in the calf of the leg—no bone is broken."

"But h'I'll bleed to death, sir. So 'elp me God, lieutenant, h'I thought they'd surrounded me. Hi was chasing two of them."

"Don't lie, I tell you, Jamieson. Give me your handkerchief."

And sprawling his prisoner once more on his back in the snow, Ray noted where the bullet had clipped through the boot; carefully cut away the leather with the sergeant's knife and snugly bound the bandanna about the wound, a groove hardly half an inch deep or two inches long at the back of the calf; hoisted his protesting prisoner into Dandy's saddle, gave one sorrowful look at the beautiful bay, now stiffening in the last agony of death; drew forth his revolver again as though to give him the mercy shot, but reflected that he might need every one of those five charges for his own protection, and then, mildly intimating to Jamieson that any attempt on his part to escape would result in his being "plugged with lead," took Dandy by the bridle rein and started on the long march for home. They were now on the open prairie some distance south of the town. Jamieson begged to be taken in there and left at the hotel, or, if the lieutenant still suspected him, in the hands of the police; but to all entreaties Ray turned a deaf ear and trudged away at a brisk walk, Dandy obediently following. Then Jamieson begged to

be taken to a ranch in the creek valley near at hand, where lived some country folk of his who would dress his wound properly; but this, too, was denied him, and by quite a wide *détour* they kept away from town, crossed the stream to the south side when they reached the road and bridge, and then headed along the bluffs for the distant fort. Not quarter of a mile beyond the ranch which Jamieson had mentioned, the sound of rapid hoof-beats and loud voices on the north bank met their ears, and Jamieson grew eager and excited. One second of listening told Ray they were not troopers, and one glance at Jamieson made him suspicious.

"If you shout for help or utter a sound, my man, it's the last cry you'll give this side of hell," he said, as with his left hand he gripped Dandy's muzzle to repress his desire to neigh, and with the other covered the ex-hussar with his pistol until the party rode on out of hearing. Then he resumed his march, recrossed on the ice to the north side at a shallow pool where the stream had been dammed for a skating rink, and had just got within thirty yards of the haystacks when a two-horse wagon loomed suddenly into view from the south side of the enclosure, at sight of which Jamieson had loudly cried.

"'Elp, boys, 'elp, for God's sake, it's Jamieson!"

"Halt there, you men! What have you got in that wagon?" shouted Ray.

The answer was a furious crack of the whip, a muttered exclamation, a rush of the horses, a shot from Ray's pistol, at sound of which the driver sprang off and scurried into the darkness, a challenge, and then a shot from the sentry, who suddenly ran around

from the north side of the fence, at which the other man disappeared, and then followed the alarm of the garrison.

In vain Jamieson pleaded that he had discovered the robbery of the magazine and was chasing the robbers when Ray overhauled him. In vain he cried that his wound was killing him. Gruff old Doctor Pease pronounced it a mere scratch a child would make no fuss over, and the colonel sternly ordered Jamieson to be carried to the guard-house and given a bed there with the hospital steward and a corporal of the guard in charge of him. The adjutant was sent with a couple of men to count the losses and secure the magazine. Hogan was despatched to make some hot tea for his lieutenant. Dandy was being rubbed by assiduous hands at the troop stable, and the colonel and Ray were slowly walking together from the guard-house towards the former's quarters, when Hogan came running forth again, almost breathless, and met them on the parade.

"Lieutenant, lieutenant!" he cried, "Mr. Blake's room has been busted into and his desk and everything there robbed too."

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE was a rallying of the clans at Ray's quarters within the half-hour that followed Hogan's abrupt announcement. Officers who had started for their homes noted the excited manner of the "striker" as he ran to meet the colonel and his lieutenant, and presently half a dozen grave-faced men were assembled at the little bachelor den and busily engaged searching the premises for any trace of the marauders. Blake had locked his room after getting out his field kit, and had left the key with Ray, who stowed it in the upper drawer of his bureau. The key was found there undisturbed, apparently unused. But Blake's door had been opened without any difficulty, probably by skeleton keys, as the lock was found thrown back and in perfect order. On the table stood his writing-desk,—a big, old-fashioned, rectangular box, brass-bound, and with compartments for stationery and valuable letters, and the conventional secret drawer opened by pulling up a brass pin in the edge of the lower half of the box, —about as unreliable a secret-keeper as one's feminine relatives. This desk had been treated with scant ceremony, forced open and hacked, and the contents were scattered about the floor. The bureau-drawers had also been pried open, and handkerchiefs, shirts, collars, and all manner of masculine gear were tumbled about.

Some scarf-pins, sleeve-buttons, etc., were gone, but nothing of any great value. It was not the hope of a rich haul that tempted any night prowler to invade the bedroom of a bachelor officer,—that was never a game worth the candle, let alone the risk. Ray had speedily realized that something very different had lured the thief, and it was he who first seized and searched the secret drawer. A packet of letters that had been there was now missing; but whether Blake took it with him to the field or whether it had been stolen that night, he could not say. Meantime, the colonel and others had found, half covered by the still falling snow, the foot-tracks of a man leading from the rear gate around to the front porch and back again. Hogan had barred the kitchen door when he went to town at sunset; and Captain Turner and some of the younger officers followed these tracks out to a point north of the old brown hospital. Here were wheel and hoof marks still faintly discernible through the mantle of snow, apparently those of a single horse and buggy.

Meantime, Freeman had lodged his stable orderly in the guard-house, put another sergeant in charge *vice* the ex-hussar, and had been investigating on his own account. The wagon-load of oats intercepted by Ray was the second that had been stolen from his forage-room that night, in the absence, presumably, of Sergeant Jamieson, and undoubtedly with the connivance of the stable orderly. The same wagon had made an earlier round trip from and to the town, avoiding the sentries by keeping to the south of the stables and hay-yard, and being unheard by reason of the muffling snow. It was Freeman who quietly announced to

Colonel Atherton, as they finally separated to get such rest as was now possible before reveille,—

"This whole thing, sir, is the work of one gang, acting in definite knowledge of affairs at the post, and I cannot make up my mind whether it is composed entirely of soldiers, or whether they have only two or three accomplices here. I have enough evidence to cast grave suspicion on Jamieson. I was going to detail Warren for duty in the stables ten days ago, but he induced me to give this man Mudge a trial, saying he was an expert hostler and horseman; and he made such a point of it that I yielded against my better judgment, for Mudge came to us with that batch of recruits only last October while we were up in the Hills."

Immediately after guard-mounting the colonel began his investigation; and the more he probed the more thoroughly was he satisfied that almost everything had been effected in accordance with a prearranged plan: Jamieson was to be away on pass, so as to know nothing of the stable robbery; the magazine was to be opened early enough at night to enable them to get their goods hidden before morning, and Ray's tour was selected, because the perpetrators knew him so well that they felt sure he would come riding down to investigate in person, leaving his quarters open to invasion. No account was taken of Hogan; he was a heavy sleeper, and was generally early in bed, deaf to any sound until the trumpet-call at dawn. Valuables, the colonel knew, they would not expect to find in the rooms of either Blake or Ray, and Ray's things had hardly been disturbed at all. His desk was untouched.

It was a question the colonel did not like to ask, but the course of the investigation seemed to demand it, and he sent for Ray.

"Do you know of anything Mr. Blake had, not of intrinsic value in itself, but that scoundrels could make convertible into money?" asked Atherton, and he thought to himself, but would not say,—"by blackmail, for instance."

Ray's face showed that he did know, though for a moment he stood in silence, making no reply.

"I understand your scruples, Mr. Ray, and respect your reticence in the matter, but that is the only theory on which I can account for their robbing his room at all, and if it be the right one, it will not take us long to put our hands on the thief. I have heard that Grimsby frequently came with letters for Mr. Blake by the back way, and I believe it was some one who hoped to use these letters who searched for them last night; and Hogan says he saw Grimsby with a horse and buggy in town at eleven o'clock."

"Blake very often read to me the contents of those notes brought by Grimsby, colonel," said Ray, promptly. "Nobody could have objected to anything I heard; and they weren't the kind to be of any use to a blackmailer."

"I do not think they were either, Ray, and I'm very glad you say so," replied the colonel, with grave kindness in his tone. "But the fact of their frequency may have given men of Grimsby's character the idea that something could be made of them. Major Granger told me weeks ago that he thoroughly distrusted the man, and meant to discharge him as soon as he

could find as good a coachman. Now, here is a letter from Colonel Rand. You got to know him well last summer, I believe,—and this is not the first time he has had dealings with the Rocky Mountain detective force. He stayed at Denver only one day, and went back at once to head-quarters; but he tells me that absolutely nothing has been heard of any man even faintly resembling Granger within the district covered by their detectives. He thinks, and they think, that he never left this neighborhood at all. Colonel Rand further says that your brother-in-law, Mr. Rallston, once had some differences with him about a large contract for horses and mules. Did Mr. Rallston ever tell you of the matter?"

"Yes, sir; and while I cannot speak of it without his permission, I have written asking him to go to Colonel Rand and give him all the facts."

The colonel was silent a moment, his eyes bent closely on the letter before him. Then he wheeled around in his chair:

"Ray, I feel that in view of Granger's strange disappearance I ought to hear everything and anything that may throw light on the subject, and my officers should not hide from me anything they may know of the man. Personally and officially I knew next to nothing of him before coming here, and since then, as he was not under my command at all, my relations with him have been those of courtesy only. Since my interviews with Colonel Rand I have learned much that was only rumor before, and that I had treated as baseless slander. But you and Truscott, I understand, would have nothing to do with him; and he intimated

to me that on one occasion you treated him with what he called 'the utmost discourtesy.'"

Ray's head went back on his shoulders and an inch or two higher,—the old characteristic sign of smouldering wrath. His dark eyes snapped, and a red spot began to burn on each cheek.

"I practically called him a thief and a liar, Colonel Atherton, if that can be termed great discourtesy, and I meant exactly what I said. It was not a proper thing to do under ordinary circumstances, but Mr. Blake and I both believed that he had instigated the assault upon Blake, and we gave him our reasons and called upon him for an explanation. He treated our letter in contemptuous fashion; insulted Blake in his reply; refused to recognize me as Blake's friend or second if it came to such a point; demanded to see Blake personally afterwards, and then was simply insolent to me when I pointed out to him that Blake refused to see him, and that any communication he had to make must be through me. He was very virulent and insulting in his reply, and then all that Rallston had told me got the upper hand, so to speak, and I did give him a piece of my mind. If he is dead, I'm sorry for having said it; if he's alive, I'll be very apt to say it again."

"Well, the major certainly put it very mildly in describing your language," said the colonel, with a quiet smile, "but I infer that you knew whereof you spoke and could prove it. Has Mr. Rallston any theory as to the cause of his disappearance? I understand that Mr. Carroll intimated in Major Stannard's hearing that if he were here he might be able to throw some light on the matter."

"I have not heard directly from Rallston in more than a fortnight, colonel. He has been away; but I look for a letter from him by every mail."

At this moment the telegraph operator tapped at the door, and, entering, handed the post commander a despatch. Atherton's lips twitched a little at the corners as he read. Something evidently amused him, for were the opposite the case he would have given no sign. His eyes were twinkling as he looked up at Ray.

"Hollis has reached Fetterman and wants to come down at once. He was shot in the thigh pretty much as you were last summer. Isn't it rather too soon for him to be undertaking long journeys?"

"Hollis's recuperative powers are immense, colonel," answered Ray, his white teeth gleaming. "I am sure it is far pleasanter to spend the days of one's convalescence here than in hospital at that bleak post. All his lady friends will rally round him, and he'll be dancing again inside of a month if the doctor isn't careful. Any news of Blake, sir?"

"Nothing; this is from Hollis himself. He wants to know if a relay of mules can't meet him at the Chugwater to-morrow. I fancy that we should not encourage such feverish haste to get back, but I will see Dr. Pease."

That evening, though the air was keen and frosty, the entire command marched out and closed on the centre for publication of orders at sunset. The long line of light-blue overcoats—six big companies of cavalrymen, recruited to the maximum as the result of the recent Indian hostilities, and four little bands

of foot, Waldron's detachment of "the Riflers"—formed a force that stretched far across the parade. For a wonder the mountain breeze was lulled; the flag drooped about its tall white staff, and the chimney-smoke sailed straight aloft. A dozen ladies were promenading briskly up and down the gravel walk, taking the air and chatting with their friends among the officers not on duty. None of the captains were with the battalion, each company being marched to the line by one of its subaltern officers. The trumpeters and field-musicians were massed at the right of the line. The adjutant took his station in front of the centre; the trumpets sounded the retreat, and with the last note the flag came fluttering down, and then the publication of orders began. First, some general court-martial cases were read, the dreary array of pleas, findings, and sentence being listened to in bored silence by the command; and then, as Mr. Billings stowed away the papers from division head-quarters and produced the sheet or two of post orders, he glanced along his line and became instantly aware that many of the men were far more interested in something going on up near the adjutant's office than they were in the fate of Private Mulligan, who, for desertion, was doomed to a couple of years at the Leavenworth prison, or of Trooper Schaatz, who, for getting gloriously drunk on pay-day and "raising Cain" about the quarters, was to labor for no less than three months in charge of the guard.

"Keep your head and eyes to the front there in the left wing!" ordered the adjutant, and went on with his reading, every now and then glancing over the top

of the page and noting that, though discipline now prevailed and the heads were straight, the eyes kept wandering westward. Before he had finished and announced the detail for the coming day, he knew that somebody had come out behind him and was standing close at hand waiting for him to complete his duty. A moment more and he had dismissed the command and was receiving the reports, and then the orderly of the commanding officer stepped forward and addressed him. The colonel desired the adjutant to come to the office at once; Major Stannard and Captains Freeman and Truscott had already gone.

The ladies were still grouped here and there along the walk, many of the officers had joined them on dispersing after parade, a number of the children whose game of tag had been suspended during the brief ceremony now resumed their noisy, laughing chase; but there was an air of gravity if not apprehension among their elders. Two rough-looking cow ponies in their heavy Mexican saddles stood with drooping heads in front of the office, and the riders had apparently gone inside. Mr. Billings took the short cut, going straight up the parade, and, without a preliminary word with any one, found himself in the presence of his colonel, Major Stannard and the two captains, and of two wiry, weatherbeaten ranchmen, one of whom was old Bryan.

The colonel was speaking as he entered: "You say that both Howell and Grimsby were there last night?"

"Yes, sir," spoke the younger of the two ranchmen; "they were in the old shack at eight o'clock; and there was three or four more men,—toughs, every one of

them; but there was no soldiers there. I saw Sergeant Jamieson in town only an hour later."

"You see, colonel," spoke up old Bryan, "there's dozens of my cattle that we haven't seen hair nor hide of since the storm, and my men have been scouring the whole country to the southeast, and Jim here—in fact, all of them—had their orders to inquire everywhere. That's how he happened to ride in there. If it had been me, I suppose I'd never have got out alive; but they didn't seem to know him. He's only been with me a few months. He came down from Idaho after the campaign."

"It seems rather reckless of Howell, as he is called, to have remained around here after escaping from the guard-house," said Atherton, reflectively.

"Why, Lord bless you, colonel," answered old Bryan. "That fellow says there isn't a guard-house in the army that can hold him five minutes longer than he chooses to stay. He has escaped from that same guard-house once before. I knew him when he was quartermaster's clerk here ten years ago, when they were building the post, sir; and a smart, capable fellow he was then; but he got to gambling, then to drinking, and then to stealing, they say, and then he disappeared for a time, and we heard he'd gone and 'listed somewhere. Yet the moment Major Granger came out here and took charge at the depot, this fellow Brooks, or Howell, turned up again, looking sober, but seedy. And damn me—I beg your pardon, sir—if he didn't get a good position right off. He could have kept it, too, but for drink. And when he drank he would talk and say all sorts of queer things. He used to brag that Granger would make

him chief clerk any day he chose to ask; he wouldn't dare refuse him; for if he did he could have the old man cashiered. He had clerked under him in New Orleans, he said, during the war, and knew all about his cotton business and steamboat contracts,—whatever they were. But last year he was drinking so hard Granger had to get rid of him, and a shooting scrape the fellow got into in town settled the business. It was a fair enough fight, I reckon; but the other man was killed, and Brooks, or Howell, was shot so bad that they thought he'd die sure; and his friends—some of this very gang, I reckon—got him out of town, and it was given out that he did die and was buried at a ranch over towards the Cache la Poudre. I know they told Granger so, and we all believed it, and the next we knew a sergeant came in here who had been stationed at the post seven years ago, and said Brooks was serving in the —d Infantry under the name of Howell, over in California; and then that very company was transferred over here to Fort Steele, and the next I knew was the night of the theatre here, and as we were going home afterwards up to the ranch my driver told me of the row down at the stables, and said that Brooks was there drunk, and that he had picked a fight with Granger's new coachman, and that Captain Truscott had clapped him in the guard-house as a deserter, recognized by Sergeant Carmody. It's the same man, colonel. The more I think of it, sir, the more I suspect that his sudden reappearance here had something to do with Major Granger's—going."

For a moment the silence in the dreary old office was something oppressive. It had begun to grow dark,

and the orderly, who approached with a lighted lamp, was warned back by a gesture from Captain Freeman, who then arose and shut the door. The colonel, seated at his desk, had listened attentively to every word the grizzled old volunteer had spoken, and was closely studying his flushed and eager face. Everybody knew Bryan's frailty,—that he would drink at times, and drink deeply when he drank at all. But one or two lessons in the recent past had served to put him more on guard over himself, and his devoted daughter had done her best. She watched him with the utmost care, and when the first symptoms of intoxication appeared, the keg of whiskey was hidden where he could never find it. And yet, to prevent his riding off to town in search of liquor, she kept a little flask, with which at long intervals she dealt him out a fragrant mixture that tided over the day and got him to bed sober. She would not abolish the keg entirely; she knew that that would simply result in his being driven from home to seek the destroyer elsewhere. Atherton heard of her pleas to the post-trader to refuse to give the old man drink when he had been drinking at all, and supplemented her request by an effective word. Twice had the old soldier been drugged and then robbed in Cheyenne; and the gang of sharps and gamblers was ever on the lookout for him. Indeed, if the truth must be told, Bryan was far more distressed by the loss of his money than by Nanny's grief over his inebriety. He was a miser who had hoarded no one knew how much. He owned valuable lots in town; he owned big herds in the foot-hills; he lent money at usurious interest, and had a balance in the First National that

would have made many a penniless subaltern rejoice with exceeding joy could it but be transferred to him. Yet all the time he protested he was poor. He was close and exacting in every bargain. He insisted on lending his cows to the officers in garrison for safe-keeping during the winter, the creatures being stall-fed and cared for in exchange for the milk they gave; and yet at the opening of the spring two or three of those meek and docile mammals would mysteriously disappear. The back doors and back gates would be found open; no one knew how. Bryan would be notified. His herders would search the other ranges and swear no cows with his brand could be found, and presently the old fellow would come riding into Russell with a long face and a longer bill, and the unwilling victim of his liberality would have to pay twenty-five or thirty dollars for a cow and costs of search, all the time feeling pretty certain that Brindle was placidly cropping the bunch-grass somewhere up among the foot-hills with Bryan's herds; but he couldn't prove it. It got to be a sort of a proverb at the post. "Don't let Bryan lend you a cow," was the advice tendered each new arrival among the married officers. And as Blake had heard all about it in the summer, when the old man came in to levy what were called his cattle-taxes on the outgoing regiment, his comrades in the —th had been given due warning. "*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*," said he, was the Latin for "Take none o' Dan Bryan's for rent—or any other way." There were other ranchmen and neighbors, envious of his increasing wealth and hating him for his miserly ways, who swore that old Captain Dan's loyalty to the flag and the gov-

ernment in the matter of giving up deserters and revealing the whereabouts of stolen property was all a delusion and a snare; that he only surrendered a deserter when sure of the reward, and only told where stolen stores could be found when they were not in his own dug-outs. Certain it is that among the "tough" element which herded about Cheyenne he had a host of enemies, powerful and implacable, and more than once had he been warned that his life would be the penalty for further disclosures. But Bryan now had a dozen stalwart men among his employés, and was grit to the backbone. He simply defied the gang. He had been one of the first to come in and join the searching parties after Granger's disappearance was announced. He was the first to declare that so far from believing that Major Granger had fled because of discoveries of peculation and embezzlement, it was his profound conviction that he had been foully dealt with.

And so the moment he heard from the lips of his herdsmen that day that Brooks and Grimsby had been at a certain lonely shack, or herdsmen's shelter, down the valley the previous night, old Bryan hastened in to the fort to lay the matter before the post commander.

"You have done us a great service, Captain Bryan," said Atherton, "and I am under many obligations to you. It is a matter in which we shall have to invoke the aid of the sheriff, for of course we have no right to search the shack. But you heard, I suppose, how fruitless was the search of Einstein's premises to-day; though Mr. Ray tracked the wagon to their very doors, and they had hundreds of dollars' worth of cartridges for which they could show no invoices at all."

"Certainly, colonel; they simply burned the boxes and paper cases, and scattered the other things all over town. As for oats and barley, they bust open the bags and dump them into the general bin, then burn the bags. But I believe if we move at once we can nab the fellows at that shack down the Crow Valley, and to-night's the time."

"I will wire the sheriff at once, captain, to meet the officer I sent in, and we will lose not a moment. Of course he'll be glad to have your statement and that of your herdsman, but in all earnestness I think you and Jim ought to go no further. These people have threatened your life, I hear; and if it were known that our information came from you, it would only intensify their desire for revenge. Let us attend to all further details in this matter."

"Colonel Atherton, I'm an old soldier. I fought alongside of your men at Winchester and Cedar Creek, and no thieving cad can scare me. I owe them fellows more than one grudge now, and I want them to know it was me that set the officers of law on the right track. I want to be there when they surround that shack to-night."

"But they have confederates everywhere, captain. They have or had associates in this very garrison, I regret to say. You are often at your ranch alone or with only a man or two; they could easily surprise you, and then I'm thinking too for your daughter; how would she fare at the hands of such a crowd?"

Old Bryan's face paled. "I'll 'low that's strong argument, colonel. She won't leave me, though. Captain and Mrs. Freeman have been mighty kind to

my girl, and kept her here often. She's better bred than I am; she's—she's more like her poor mother." And here he hitched uneasily in his chair and turned his grizzled face away, winking hard; and there was silence in the room. Then as suddenly he whirled about again:

"Colonel, I—I want you to understand something. It ain't that I grudge the money,—it ain't that I wouldn't send her East to school. I've tried hard to get her to go East. It ain't what people say at all. All I've got in the world ain't good enough for that little girl of mine. She's stood by me when—when I didn't know her." And he bowed his old head and drew his hand over his blinking eyes. "I want her to go, and be educated and be a lady. No! She *is* a lady, and her mother was before her; but she just clings to me, and says she never will go,—never will leave her old dad, by God!" And here he broke off with a sob and covered his face with a big red bandanna; then rose hastily and tramped over to the window, hiding his face from all. It was a minute or so before he could recover himself, then after vigorous rubbing of his eyes he returned to them.

"I had to lie to her to get away this time. I said I'd be with her again just as soon as I'd seen you. But it won't be out there, if Captain Freeman will be so kind as to send over to the ranch for her. The old place can take care of itself to-night. I'm going in with the sheriff. I'm going to help run that gang to earth; and, by God, Colonel Atherton, I believe that before another sunrise I'll know what's become of Major Granger."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS. FREEMAN'S bright little home was rather crowded by the time tattoo was sounded this crisp, starlit evening. Everybody seemed to know that she and the captain had driven away to Bryan's ranch the moment the old fellow left the garrison to join the sheriff in town, and that "Prairie Nan" was with them when they returned. Nearly everybody was eager to know what Bryan had told the colonel, and Freeman was the only available person from whom the information could be extracted,—Truscott having ridden away on some mysterious mission to the depot, and the major and the adjutant being still closeted with their chief. People felt that something had been heard of Major Granger and were incredulous and disappointed when Freeman assured them that not a trace had been discovered.

"If it wasn't something about Major Granger that kept you all up there so long, then what was it?" demanded Mrs. Turner, who, after a few days' pathetic retirement and seclusion, another day or two of desperate effort to play the *rôle* of patient and uncomplaining suffering, was now with redoubled ardor and interest beginning to "take notice" again.

"Nothing at all beyond a report from old Bryan that one of his men had found the possible whereabouts

of the magazine and stable thieves," answered Freeman, good-naturedly.

"Oh, if all I hear is true, Captain Bryan's people know a heap more about the way things have been stolen here for years past than Colonel Atherton could find out if he worked a lifetime," began Mrs. Turner, excitedly, though Turner shot his warning glance, and then, stepping to her side, managed to check further flow of eloquence, as Nannie, having discarded her warm wraps, was ushered into the brightly-lighted little parlor. Just now Mrs. Turner's grievance was mainly against the colonel. He had showered honors and attentions on Mrs. Granger, she said, whom everybody now, at least, knew in her true light,—she was a "professional," and had no business playing with amateurs and concealing her real self from them until the last moment. She never thought the colonel would have neglected the ladies of his regiment, who had always been so loyal to him, for the sake of—of "a mere adventuress." But Mrs. Turner was both indignant and illogical. She could never, of course, be brought to believe that no woman in the —th had so fiercely criticised the colonel's orders and disciplinary methods as herself, and that she was about the last of the lot to rightly set up the claim of loyalty to him; she ignored, of course, the fact that, by her going directly home from the theatricals, all possibility of congratulation or courtesy from the commanding officer had been barred as far as she was concerned. Eager to hear any news that might be abroad, she had insisted on running up to the Freemans' at tattoo, and Turner obediently went along, watchful of her every move, and plainly

striving to keep her out of mischief. It so happened that the Heaths and some infantry friends had dropped in about the same time, and, always kindly and hospitable, Mrs. Freeman had not only begged them all to stay and "have a little bite by and by," but she sent out for two of Nan's girl friends in garrison. Something must be done, she argued, to keep the child from brooding over her father's absence, which, all too evidently, Nan believed to be upon some fateful and dangerous errand.

And so it happened that all was mirth and laughter, feasting and jollity when the summons came.

Somewhere about eleven o'clock the colonel himself appeared at Freeman's quarters and called him out on the veranda.

"Expecting trouble," said he, "I told the operator to remain at his instrument this evening. This has just come."

So saying he handed Freeman a despatch, which the latter carried close to the window and read by the bright light from within. It was from the sheriff:

"Sharp tussle at the shack; Bryan badly shot; wants to see his daughter at once; the doctor is taking him to the depot."

"How can she go?" asked the colonel, presently.

"Mrs. Freeman and I will take her at once," answered the captain. "Doesn't it look to you as though they had failed to make any arrests?"

"I am afraid so. He must have had too small a posse."

An hour later an anxious group was gathered in the steward's room of the little hospital at the depot. The

time had been when all the sick among the army of employés of the supply department had been turned loose on the town or sent up to the post for treatment; but after the big campaign of '76 the officials had succeeded in having a sort of emergency hospital attached to the depot, with a contract doctor and a steward. Never anticipating a determined resistance or any really serious affray, the sheriff had taken with him only two deputies when starting out from town to investigate matters at the shack to which Bryan was so eager to guide him. It lay down in the valley under the shelter of the bluffs nearly a mile west of the business centre of the town and almost as far off the lines of travel. Long it had borne a bad name, but rarely were there more than two or three men gathered about it either by night or day, and the sheriff had so often occasion to go thither with a warrant of some kind that he had grown accustomed to the trip and looked upon it as a useless bore. The colonel's note and Bryan's eagerness had only partially aroused his interest.

"We won't find anything there," he said; "those fellows are not fools enough to remain in this neighborhood, and as for any government property, it's scattered all over Wyoming by this time, and you'll never see hide nor hair of it again."

But Bryan persisted. The sheriff summoned a brace of deputies; the party mounted their horses; rode out westward, then down into the breaks of the stream, and presently came in view of the twinkling lights at the hut. Dismounting there, with the contempt of easy familiarity the sheriff hammered on the door and demanded admission. Shuffling feet, excited whispers, and

the sound of a scuffle were the immediate replies. Again he hammered with the butt of his Colt. Then all was silence and the light went out.

Angered now at the defiance to his authority, the sheriff ordered his men to burst in the door. It took hard work and much time. When it suddenly gave way three stalwart men went tumbling blindly into the shack, and found themselves sprawling on the earthen floor, while with a rush and a smothered laugh three or four active fellows had leaped past them into the open air; had mounted the horses of the sheriff's party, and in the twinkling of an eye were dashing off townwards. One of them old Bryan had essayed to stop,—the last and the heaviest built. A pistol flashed in the darkness. The sheriff, running to the scene, heard the hoof-beats dying away in the distance, and fell flat over the prostrate, bleeding form of the old volunteer. The lights of the great depot shone not far away across the snow-streaked prairie, and thither one of his men ran for the doctor; thither was old Bryan tenderly borne, while the sheriff, exasperated and chagrined, hurried back to town to find his horses and telegraph to the post.

And now at midnight the old ranchman lay gasping in the hospital ward. Nannie, white and tearful, but very quiet and self-possessed, was kneeling by his side, wiping the death-dews from his forehead and soothing his agony as best she knew how. Doctor Pease had been summoned down from the fort, and he, too, had shaken his head in answer to the mute appeal in the daughter's big, brimming eyes. The old man was bleeding internally, and there was little hope of his lasting until dawn. He was semi-conscious only. He

clung to Nannie with a love that was piteous in its tenderness and intensity. He seemed to think only of and for her. When he could speak at all it was to tell her how now she must go East, go to her mother's people and be a lady,—be educated. He implored Mrs. Freeman and the captain to continue their goodness to his little girl.

"I'm all she had in the world until you came, and I was—worse than a burden to her," he almost sobbed; "but she'll need for nothing now, if you'll only be a friend to her, ma'am," he said, looking imploringly up into Mrs. Freeman's sweet and sympathetic face.

"Indeed, we've all learned to love her, captain," was the answer. "Never fear that she'll not be as one of our own." And Freeman, too, whom the bluff old soldier had learned to regard with respect and confidence, added his assurances to those of his wife. It seemed to comfort Bryan, for he patted Nannie's long, slender hand and soon fell away into a semi-comatose state. Then came delirious intervals, and both the doctors and the steward were needed to restrain him, for he began to toss upon the bed, to struggle with the attendant and to glare at the corners of the room with savage hate in his eyes.

"Give me that knife," he cried; "I haven't had a fair show in this fight. You shot me in the dark, you cockney hound!—you and your cowardly pals! What have you done with your own master? Where have you hidden Granger, I say? You robbed him, you hounds! you know you did, and, when he turned on you, killed him. Where have you hidden him, I say? You know, you white-livered scoundrel, you Grimsby.

You know, damn you! Don't shoot—don't shoo an unarmed man, you coward. Give me that knife, I say."

And so he raved and, in his struggles, he wellnigh broke from the attendant's grasp.

Pease and the younger physician stepped into the adjoining room a moment, when, exhausted, the old man fell back on his pillow, panting and trembling, his long fingers clutching at the bedclothes. Even Nannie, weeping and piteously calling him, could not now command his wandering thoughts. His soul seemed passing away in some wild, fierce dream. He was defying some band of outlaws whose secrets he knew, whose plans he had frustrated; he was surrounded by them, death was staring him in the face, but to the bitter end he taunted them with the failure of their schemes and with the fact that he had unearthed their plots and given warning to the authorities.

"You'll never trap another man, damn you!" he shouted again. "You made Granger your tool, your dupe; but he was in your toils when he came here.—You fellow,—you Brooks. You're the man that knifed him. You and Grimsby would have sucked him dry, wouldn't you? But I was on to you—I was on to you. You'll get no cash from her either, you infernal blackmailers. I'll warn her, too. Yes, shoot, shoot, if you dare. Where have you hidden his body, I say?' And again he fell back weaker still. Pease knelt and gently forced the stimulant between his setting teeth.

"Mrs. Granger has sent for me," whispered the depot doctor to his superior. "Shall I tell her?" And he nodded suggestively towards the dying man.

"Yes, there's no saying how much of this is suspicion, and how much actual knowledge. What do you think, Freeman?"

"If it is only raving, there is a volume behind it all," was the answer. "Is there no way of finding out what he does know?"

"Too late, I'm afraid. He knows these people well, that's evident; but I doubt if there is anything more than mere suspicion at the bottom of it all. Didn't the sheriff's deputies say they were going down to search those premises to-night and take a strong posse with them?"

"Yes, that's why they hurried back to town. Try and coax Nannie into the next room a few moments; I want to look at him."

But even Mrs. Freeman could hardly persuade the child to leave her father for a moment. It was only when Freeman lifted her from her knees and almost bore her into the adjoining room that she would consent to go with him. Bryan was perceptibly growing fainter; the violence of his delirium was over, and every moment his breath seemed to flutter, shorter and shorter. Pease was doing all his skill could suggest to prolong life and restore him to partial consciousness and strength. So much seemed to depend on his telling them the exact truth and the nature of his knowledge or suspicion. In the steward's room Nannie had been persuaded to sip some tea. Then all was silent in the little wooden hospital, and the child had thrown herself on her knees and buried her face in Mrs. Freeman's lap, when there was a sound of low voices without and footsteps on the

creaking board-walk. The steward's wife opened the door, and there on the threshold, throwing back her mantle, pallid, heavy-eyed, but beautiful, stood Mrs. Granger. Behind her were Mrs. Morris and the doctor.

Freeman stepped forward to greet her; Mrs. Freeman flushed, but bowed with quiet courtesy. The newcomers paused but a moment at the door-way. Mrs. Granger swept one quick glance round, then in low, awe-stricken tone, inquired,—

"Is there no hope? Can nothing be done?"

Freeman shook his head and pointed to Nan, who was again silently weeping.

"And yet he knows something—perhaps everything—of my husband's disappearance. Captain Freeman, I must see him, I must ask, I must know. This suspense is far worse than any truth can be. Is Doctor Pease not with him?"

"Doctor Pease is there doing all he can. I am not at all sure that he really knows anything of the major's disappearance, but he certainly has had some suspicion, Mrs. Granger. He has said nothing that would give any definite idea or clue."

"He has mentioned Grimsby's name, has he not?—and Brooks, that dreadful fellow who seemed to follow him everywhere. Surely he must have some reason for accusing them. Surely he knows while we are groping in the dark."

And then Pease came from the inner room and took her hand:

"I fear that if he knew anything at all, Mrs. Granger, it is past finding out. I fear," he whispered, "he can never rally again."

She covered her face with the white jewelled hands and sank despairingly upon the rude hair-cloth sofa. Mrs. Morris was promptly at her side striving to soothe and calm her.

"She has had such an awful week of it, captain," the lady explained to Freeman. "Absolutely no tidings at all, and yet all manner of people coming out from town inquiring for particulars, and all sorts of men coming who pretended they had clues and only wanted money to work them up. She has been nearly distracted, and so friendless through it all," added Mrs. Morris, with a glance of reproach at Mrs. Freeman.

But Freeman had no time to waste on controversy. He knew well enough that one after another those ladies who had gone from the garrison to tender sympathy or service had been met at the door by Mrs. Granger's message of thanks, but there was really nothing they could do. The hands of the clock were pointing to quarter of three. Nannie had again stolen back to the side of the dying man, when once more the feeble voice was heard, and Pease came and beckoned. Mrs. Granger started up and followed him beyond the door-way of the other room. Taking his wife's hand Freeman bent over and whispered a few words, then noiselessly stepped into the dimly-lighted chamber.

Bryan knew his daughter again, and the feeble hand was vainly striving to caress the ringlets that curled about her forehead, while the appealing eyes, dark with the solemn shadow of death, gazed yearningly into her sweet, tearful face.

"They'll be good to you, Nan," he whispered.

"You'll be a lady now like your mother, girl; you won't have no more worry about the old man."

"Oh, papa! papa!" she wailed, "stop saying that. Nan loves you so much better than all the wide world."

"I know," he faintly nodded,—"I know; you were always such a loving daughter, Nannie; always—even when I was——" And he tried to turn away, as though the old shame overpowered him even here at the threshold of another world. It was then that Pease bent over him.

"Captain," he said, "you have been speaking of Brooks, or Howell, and Grimsby as though they were the men who shot you, and as though they were the men who made away with Major Granger. Tell me what you know."

"Howell? no! I don't know him; but Brooks—Brooks! ay, he's the traitor—he's the—he's the—— Where's my knife, Nan? Keep back there from that door, you hounds! Keep back, I tell you! I will know what you have hidden behind that shack; I will, if I have to bring all Laramie County here to hold you. Dig away there, men! Dig away! Toss it out! Toss it out! Dig into that snow! Ten feet deep? Suppose it is! Suppose it's twenty! All the more would they pick out just such a place to hide him. Hang on to those fellows, you constables; that man Brooks will have your own knife in your heart if you're not careful. I know him; I know the whole gang. They killed him! They killed him, I tell you, when they couldn't bleed him any more! Give me that shovel! *You* can't dig! For God's sake,

make those men work, captain, or send some of the boys down from the fort! They'll find him; they'll never give up. It's all banked solid back of the shack—banked solid as far as the cooley runs. There's where they've hid him, and I know it. They've had a rope around his neck for years, and now at last they've pulled it."

He struggled faintly to rise, his eyes glaring with excitement, his tremulous hands outstretched. In vain Nannie clung to one of them and plead with him to speak to her,—to forget these terrible visions. Mrs. Granger had stepped forward to the foot of the bed, and with her hands clasped stood gazing into his face, her eyes almost protruding, her mouth half open, trembling in every limb, yet listening eagerly for every word. Pease, closely watching the features of the old soldier, bent over Nannie's kneeling form. Mrs. Freeman had stolen to her husband's side, and the tears were trickling down her cheeks as she stood, never losing sight of her little friend. The attendants were supporting Bryan at the other side of the bed. Mrs. Morris was sniffling audibly at the door.

"You don't half work," whispered the old man. "You don't half work. Give me the shovel, I say. Didn't I promise the colonel I'd find him? Him and me fought at Winchester together. You wouldn't have me go back on him now. Keep on, I tell you! Keep on there! Dig—dig as if the gold of all Wyoming was massed in that gulch! My God! can't you find nothing?"

Outside, slow hoof-beats were coming up the road, but no one heard within. All senses were engrossed

in the solemn scene before them. Seeing the light in the little hospital, the foremost horseman stopped and held low-toned consultation with the two who followed. Once more the gleam seemed brightening in the old man's eyes. Once more he strove to lift himself from the pillow.

"Look!" he suddenly cried; "look! You've got him! You've got it! Didn't I tell you, colonel?—didn't I say that—before another sunrise I'd know what—what had—become of Granger?"

And then some one began knocking at the door. It was one of the sheriff's men, who shrank back the moment he caught sight of Mrs. Granger.

CHAPTER XIX.

When the command turned out for stables in the wintry dawn of the day that soon broke upon the wide prairie wastes, the word went round from mouth to mouth that old Captain Bryan was killed in an attempt to capture some desperadoes at the shack down the valley near the railway bridge, and that Major Granger's body had been found in the ravine behind the hut, frozen stiff and buried deep in the snow-drifts. But the command did not know the message brought to the colonel by Freeman,—that the sheriff's people had found a gaping bullet wound in the right side of the head; the face, hair, and whiskers burned with powder, and the major's own revolver, with one chamber discharged, lying close by the stiffened right hand. The officials pronounced it a case of suicide, but the coroner's inquest was yet to be held.

Of the inmates of the shack not a trace was to be found. Just how many men had leaped past the little party of the sheriff no one knew. They had gone with four horses, at all events, and though the horses were found inside of an hour loose in the streets of the town, no sign of their latest riders had been obtained. The sheriff was "tearing mad." Never before had he found such a formidable party at the shack; never had they failed to surrender at his demand, and

throw open the premises for inspection. It was a new gang, he swore, and suspicion pointed to Brooks, or "Howell," Grimsby, and some of their tough associates. But whither had they vanished? Every saloon, every dive or den in town was searched, and they hadn't even been heard of. They could have got their own horses and gone away, he knew; but no stablemen would admit having seen or heard anything of their horses. That they should have abandoned those of the sheriff's posse was natural enough. All Wyoming knew that brand; and, however slow the frontiersman might be to hang a fellow-citizen for shooting a man, there was only the short shrift and sudden cord for him who borrowed his neighbor's horse.

By noon the coroner's jury had finished its labors in both cases. "Died of gunshot wounds inflicted by person or persons unknown," was the verdict in the case of old Bryan; and "died of gunshot wounds inflicted by person or persons unknown" was eventually the finding in the other, though for a long time a minority of that intelligent body, the jury, had held out for the additional words, "but with suicidal intent," which would have made the finding most unique and sensational.

That night a guard of honor stood by the remains of the sturdy old volunteer in the post-hospital at the fort, and a similar detail was tendered at the depot, the residence of the late Major Granger, but was civilly declined. At sunset on the second day a solemn little *cortége* filed out from the garrison, and the old trooper ranchman was buried with military honors in the little prairie cemetery, and Nannie Bryan, fatherless, mother-

less, and wellnigh alone in the world, was borne weeping desolately back to the Freeman's peaceful fireside. When the east-bound express left the station one day later, the remains of the deceased official of the supply department were accorded transportation in the coldest corner of the baggage-car, while his disconsolate relict, superb in her mourning garb, was stowed in the warmest, snuggest state-room of the Pullman sleeper, Mrs. Morris devotedly accompanying her friend as far as Omaha; several sympathizing towns- and fort-people being present to say adieu, and the last man to bend over her black-gloved hand was Tommy Hollis, who limped in on crutches to say good-by and, in low earnest tones, to promise that he would write to her day after day, even though he knew she would be unequal to answering yet awhile.

"Two men gone to their last account," said Mrs. Wilkins, as she gazed after the rapidly disappearing train. "Two men gone to their last account, and two women unexpectedly made wealthy in their own right. But there's nayther of them for you, Tommy; mind that."

Poor Hollis! Heaven only knows what hopes inspired him on the tedious, painful three-days' journey down from Fetterman, but they were all turned to naught in less than no time. If he thought to pose as the convalescent hero at the fort, that hope proved futile for just two reasons. Wounded officers were not such rarities in the —th as to make his an exceptional case at all, and even if there had been a disposition to ignore his blunder anent the ladies german and restore him to high favor again, his very first move on getting

within hail of the garrison was sufficient to unseat him. He ordered the driver to take him first to the house of mourning at the depot. He had telegraphed his sorrow, his sympathy, his speedy coming from every possible point *en route*, and had hastened to limp into her adored presence, and had actually been received.

"I cannot deny a few minutes to that loyal and devoted friend," she had explained to Mrs. Morris. And the few minutes lengthened to nearly an hour before he was sent away; and all Russell knew by sunset that she had granted Tommy an interview, while denying herself to everybody else except Freeman and Truscott, whom she sent for to consult upon her husband's affairs.

Pease told Hollis that if he left his quarters and went into town for any purpose whatever he would not be answerable for the safety of that leg, but Tommy was not to be deterred. He even sought the medico's favorable endorsement upon his application for an immediate leave of absence, and was bluntly refused. He would eagerly have welcomed the possibility of being her escort eastward, even when he needed assistance more than she did. He sounded the colonel with the suggestion that he, Atherton, should telegraph to department head-quarters for permission for the invalided officer to start east at once, and the colonel scouted the idea. He was really seriously the worse for his journey to town to see her off, and was cooped up in his quarters for nearly a week, and no ladies came to condole with him, though a few sent jellies and delicacies, and "the boys" came in and chaffed him, and Mrs. Wilkins loaded them with messages, inquiries, and cake to carry

him. He wrote long letters to the lovely widow, but could expect no replies for a long, long time, as she pathetically had told him.

And then Annie, who had been the Granger's second girl at the depot, and was now out of employment, came up to the fort, where servants were always scarce, and was presently installed in the place of "Mina Next Door;" and in turning over her instructions to her friend and countrywoman, Mina doubtless omitted those given by Captain Turner to the effect that she was not to venture through that hole in the fence. Mina had differed with her mistress, and thought she could do better at the Heaths, whose girl had just married Corporal Finucane, and Annie was soon as much at home in Mrs. Turner's kitchen as she had ever been in her own.

Meantime the late, reluctant spring was breaking. The days were getting longer, warmer, and more laden with the sweet south wind. Tiny little flowerets, snow-white,—the Star of Bethlehem,—began to peep out among the clumps of bunch-grass; the snow had softened and moistened the soil and gone its way; even in the deepest ravines it was disappearing, and only on the lofty peaks far down the Colorado range, and up among the twisting snow-sheds on the great divide to the west, did it still glisten in the sunshine. But the little starry flowers speedily covered the rolling waves of prairie like a snowy fleece, and so long as the sun was high the children and their mothers strolled out over the broad expanse north and east of the post, gathering the dainty blossoms by the handful, and all the garrison seemed rejoicing that the spell of the grim

frost-king was broken. The ice, too, went whirling out of the swollen stream and banked itself high around the abutments of the railway bridge, where it melted rapidly, and where some truant town boys, not having the fear of territorial school commissioners before their eyes, skylarking about the east pier, came suddenly upon a sight that frightened a few of them into running a mile before they stopped, but only excited the morbid curiosity of the stouter-hearted. A man's hand and arm could be seen among the ice blocks, and, by dint of prying off the uppermost, they came finally upon the grewsome remains of what they decided to be a railway tramp, but which remains were identified by the coroner's witnesses that evening as those of the long missing Grimsby, and Grimsby, too, had been shot through the head.

No papers, no money, no valuables of any kind were found on the frozen body. The coat and waistcoat were gone; so were the boots. He had been robbed as well as murdered, and again the jury found the deceased had come to his death by gunshot wounds inflicted by a person or persons unknown. It was the stereotyped form.

And then came the detachments back from the field with intimations that it would be well for them to refit as soon as possible for a summer campaign, probably in the Big Horn country. And one afternoon the telegraph clicked the news that Lieutenant Blake with his command would leave Fetterman on their homeward way on the 16th, and might be expected at Russell by the 20th.

"You may all make up your minds to it now as

well as a month later," said Mrs. Atherton; "I tell you I feel it in the air this regiment is going out on field service the moment the grass is green beyond the Platte. I know the colonel thinks so; and it will never see this post again before the snows fall. *I'm* going East."

And so, it seems, were others of the ladies of the —th. Mrs. Stannard had long since made up her mind that she and Luce would run in for a visit to the old home they had seen so little of since the early days of the war of the rebellion. Mrs. Freeman had been promising to bring the children to see their devoted grandparents, and now, too, it was time to take Nannie Bryan to her mother's people and see her safely placed in their hands. The Greggs household were only waiting for the signal for the cavalry to be up and away to take the first train and "start for the States." Mrs. Truscott, secretly though she longed to show her fond old father that phenomenal baby, could not be induced to think of going so long as Jack senior was permitted to stay; but he and Freeman had been thrown into communication with Colonel Rand, of department headquarters, quite frequently of late, settling those strangely tangled affairs of Granger's, and Jack said there could be no doubt he would be in the field within the next month.

"And won't Mr. Ray have difficulty in getting his leave if that be the case?" asked Mrs. Grace, with womanly anxiety. "Only fancy having—*that* postponed."

And by "that" Mrs. Truscott meant a certain wedding in which she was deeply interested; the wedding

that was to unite the dearest friend of her school-days to the man of all others in the regiment of whom she and Jack most approved,—this same Mr. Ray.

"I think not, dear. No hostilities of any kind are probable. It is only to occupy the battle-grounds of last year, and scout the country that we are likely to be sent up there. Besides, Ray's captain, Buxton, ought to rejoin by that time, and that will leave two officers with the troop without the first lieutenant. What's more, his promotion may come any day now, and that will take him to Sidney. Oh, no, don't worry your bright head about that. We'll have that wedding in June, though I shan't see it."

"Neither will I, Jack, without you," said Mrs. Grace, almost tearfully. But Captain Truscott had his own projects on that matter, and wisely kept them to himself.

It was the very same evening that they had the news of Blake's homeward march that Mrs. Freeman found she desired to communicate something to her liege: "He will be here on Friday, won't he?" she asked.

"Yes, Friday afternoon some time. Why?"

"Well, you were saying there was no reason why we should not start Saturday. Now, suppose I were to say that we could all be ready Thursday as well as not. Would it make any difference if we went then?"

"Why, no; only I didn't think you would want to go before you had to. I'm sure the children don't."

"It isn't the children;—it isn't of myself I'm thinking," she answered, with heightening color. "But I think—I know—Nannie."

And Freeman only answered, "Ah, yes, I see."

And so it happened that when a bearded and bright-eyed Blake came riding in on Friday afternoon to be tumultuously greeted by more than half the occupants of officers' row, Captain Freeman was among the first to take him by the hand and bid him cordial welcome.

"You and Ray are to come in and lunch with me just as you are. I am living *en garçon* now. The madam and the olive-branches deserted me yesterday."

"Yes, you've got to, Blakey," promptly interposed Ray, "for I told Hogan he needn't have anything saved for you, we would lunch with Captain Freeman."

"Zounds, man! I'd lunch with Caliban himself. Give me but time to lave these road-stained hands.—Wilkins, thou witless wight, how is it with thee and thy better half? and thine, Gregg, old man? My heart leaps anew at sight of thee.—Oh, hello, Crane, how are you?—Excuse me now, fellows, just let me have discourse with mine ancient here.—Any letters, Billy?" he asked in lower tone.

"Some bills, I reckon, nothing else. I've forwarded everything that came, up to the 15th. Why didn't you answer my question about the—about those private letters you stowed in your desk, Legs?"

"Didn't get your letter until just about as we were ordered home. I thought you knew—I burned them. There wasn't a thing left in that old trap of a desk that was worth stealing, and, even if I hadn't burned them, *you* knew they were harmless. Why, you don't suppose I was going in the Indian country with letters that might compromise a woman. You wouldn't have me found dead with such a thing as that about me, would you?"

"I wouldn't have you found with her letters about you dead or alive, Legs, and I'm glad—more glad than I can tell you—you're done with it all." And Ray looked almost wistfully, for him, into his companion's face. But Blake turned away. They were just at the little gate at the moment. The group of officers was scattering, some going homeward, some about their garrison duties. Freeman sang out,—

"You come in as soon as you can, will you?—and I'll order luncheon at once."

Several noisy, rosy-cheeked children precipitated themselves upon the tall lieutenant at this and clung in assorted sizes about his long legs, and Blake demonstratively greeted them one and all. Then Tommy Hollis came swinging up the row on his crutches, showing every one of his handsome teeth under the dark thatch of his mustache in genial welcome to his erstwhile persecutor. Tommy could no more cherish ill will or malice than Ray could save money, and Blake shook hands with his very presentable junior, mentally contrasting Tommy's sleek appearance with his own travel-stained garb, and raising a laugh among the comrades again within hearing by a jocular allusion to Hollis's keeping his leg in a sling.

"Hollis is boning for a sick leave," put in Crane, who, undeterred by the coldness of Blake's greeting to him alone of the entire party, seemed bent on keeping on speaking terms. "He wants to look ill enough to soften the surgeon's heart in the first place, and swell enough to captivate his lady-love in the next."

"Come in, Hollis; come in and see a fellow," said Blake, with more cordiality than he had ever shown

before. "I want to ask you something about that cañon where you had your fight, while I'm dodging out of these things. Come in, man."

"Well-l, say—hold on a moment and I'll be with you," was the hesitating answer, as Hollis glanced anxiously up the row where the orderly trumpeter could now be seen distributing the mail.

"Oh, come now," said Blake, who totally ignored Crane and was disengaging himself from the clasping arms of two or three of the more importunate children. "Oh! Is it the mail you're looking for? Expect your leave to-day, Thomas? I'll have to be getting in an early bid for mine, won't I, Billy?" he continued in lower tone, as he passed his arm affectionately around his comrade's square shoulders. "Is the day named yet?—June?"

Ray nodded, then strove to draw his tall friend within the open door-way where Hogan stood, with broad Irish grin upon his face, eager to welcome home the man whom next to his own troop commander he loved and swore by. But some odd load seemed hampering Blake's reluctant feet. He, too, by this time was looking anxiously towards the coming orderly, who passed Freeman by and stepped briskly towards the group, the packet of letters in his white-gloved hand. Ray could not but mark the deep border of black on the topmost. Entering the gate with precise salute, the young trumpeter passed Hollis by; handed to Blake the letter in the mourning envelope; handed Ray two dainty missives addressed in feminine superscription; faced about and stopped short where Hollis —a queer look on his face—was gazing stupidly at the

letter Blake was now stowing in a breast-pocket; then turning over four or five, he selected two envelopes from near the bottom of the packet, which he handed to the junior lieutenant, and which that gentleman mechanically took, but barely glanced at; his troubled eyes wandering back to Blake, who was now turning away to enter the house, when Crane burst into a jeering laugh.

"You're left, Tommy. She won't write to you any more, now that Legs is home."

Ray was out through the open gate in about a second. For nearly two months he had not spoken to or noticed Crane at all. Now he bristled up to him like a terrier to some thieving hound.

"You whelp!" he muttered, his fists clinching, his dark eyes flashing. "If you don't want me to throttle you here and now—go!"

"Why? What in thunder have I said that concerns you?" mumbled the other.

"Get out! or, ——, I'll kick you," was the sole reply. And Crane, as usual, went without another word.

When Ray faced about he found Blake and Hollis silently regarding each other, one at the edge of the portico, the other not six feet away on the narrow board-walk to the gate.

"We'll see you later, Tommy," he whispered. "I want Blake at Freeman's at once. Come, Legs." And so saying, he drew his tall companion within and closed the door. For a moment Hollis remained looking blankly after them, then slowly hobbled away, his left foot lifted from the ground. Crane had halted some

distance down the row, his face crimson with wrath and mortification. He turned back, seeing Hollis alone.

"Say, Tommy, I'll kill that fellow Ray some day if he don't quit speaking to me like this. I was only in fun. I didn't mean——"

But it was useless to go further, for with a shrug of his shoulder Hollis passed him by, entered his own quarters, and slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XX.

JUNE came in bright, radiant, and beautiful. True to regimental prophecies, the —th had taken the field and was well away northward at the slopes of the Big Horn Range, leaving Russell to its guarding detachment of "The Riflers," with placid old Waldron in command, with the band of the —th to play for them, but otherwise with hardly a yellow stripe to be seen in garrison. Several of the officers' quarters were vacated and the domestic Lares and Penates were visited every few days by the temporary post-quartermaster to see that thieves had not broken in and stolen, though this was a matter he could no more prevent than that moth and rust should corrupt. Still, since the mysterious pillaging of Mr. Blake's quarters early in the spring, and soon after the great storm, nothing of the kind had been heard of in garrison. Mr. Foster, Waldron's adjutant, was occupying a room in the Atherton's big house, the colonel being with his regiment in the field and her ladyship visiting at the seashore. Another infantry bachelor was similarly guarding the Stannard's house, and having a supervisory interest in the Truscott's; Grace and Baby Jack having gone East the day Jack senior marched for the Big Horn. Mrs. Waldron dropped in every day or two to see that the rats were not eating the strings of Mrs

Freeman's piano, wondering what she could do if she found they were. A large contingent of the ladies and children of the —th still remained at Russell, and were there to bid good-by to Tommy Hollis, who was allowed a three months' leave in which to recuperate, when the surgeon said he was not in condition to ride and so could not go to the summer camp with his regiment. They were there to welcome Blake when he came trotting back from Fetterman, the second time he had made the trip within three months; for everybody knew by this time he had a sixty days' leave in which to go East and to be best man for Billy Ray, who was to wed Miss Sanford this very month, and a "swell" affair it was to be. Everybody seemed to know that when he reached the post three letters, edged with black, were waiting for him in the adjutant's office, and another came the very day he rode in. What nobody knew, but everybody could conjecture, was the number of letters in that same superscription and mourning guise that had been going up to the Big Horn on the trail of the —th in the few weeks that elapsed since that famous corps had marched away.

Everybody wanted Blake to dine that evening, so that the household which secured him could have "first chop" of all the news from the front, and the undivided bliss of retailing it on the morrow. But though in the blithest, wildest spirits, Blake swore he couldn't dine with anybody. He had all his packing to do, and would spend the night at the hotel in town.

"You needn't ask why!" asseverated Mrs. Wilkins, when the ladies were expressing their opinion, "sure

it's to spend the evening with *her* friend Mrs. Morris. Faith, those weeds of hers will be sprouting wedding-blossoms soon enough, though I misdoubt me she'll be fooling Blake again."

There were not a few among the ladies who sorely resented it in Blake that he should pass them by when a few words about the dear ones in the field would have been so much to them. He did make a hurried call at every house still occupied by the families of his brother officers, and delivered notes or messages intrusted to his care, but this was not what was needed in all cases. Women of Mrs. Turner's stamp especially wanted to get him all to themselves and cross-examine and pry. "Was it so that Mr. Crane was drinking hard again? Was it true that there was a game of poker going on all the time? Was the colonel as exacting and horrid as he was at the post?" She was "down on the colonel" now and had been ever since his attentions to Mrs. Granger and his compliments to that lady after the theatricals. "Did Captain Raymond *ever* get letters from Mrs. Raymond, now that she was at the Point?" (How Mrs. Turner envied her!) "Who was Mr. Dana corresponding with? Wasn't there something behind Mr. Carroll's arrest besides a mere charge of staying back at Fetterman without leave? He was so attentive to Mrs. Perkins once, you know, and wasn't she there when the regiment went through?" But all this Blake dodged, as he did all inquiry into his own personal plans and affairs, by the laughing, ranting jollity of his replies: He get married? Heavens, yes! When he contemplated Ray's happiness it made him long to rest his future in the

hands of some lovely woman who would pay all his bills, adorn his fireside, furnish his quarters, and otherwise show her solid appreciation of his worth. He would throw himself at the feet of any woman whom he even faintly suspected of any such sentiments. He made his escape from the garrison, laughing, joyous, brimming over with fun and high spirits,—up to the last moment they saw him, at least,—and nobody really knew any more about his affairs than they did before.

And yet many of them remembered the sudden frown that fell upon his face, the suppressed anger in his tone, when the young infantryman who was officer of the day came to him just after retreat, saying,—

"Oh, Blake, that prisoner, Jamieson, who is awaiting sentence here, begs permission to speak with you a moment before you go."

"I decline to see or speak with him, Graham. That man is an incarnate blackguard."

"Well, he seemed very urgent," said the junior officer, slowly, as though excusing himself. "He said there was a matter of great importance to you, and, as we all know he was connected with the gang that robbed the stables and magazine, I thought perhaps he could tell something about the robbery of your own quarters."

"There was nothing taken worth speaking of,—especially speaking to such a cad as that,—some old sleeve-buttons and a pin or two," was Blake's reply.

"But," said Mrs. Turner, "we heard there were certain letters stolen from a secret drawer."

"Bless your heart, fair lady! so did I. I've heard all

sorts of things; but I find it hard to believe them, because there weren't any letters in there."

"Oh, well, of course, I didn't know, but that was what everybody said," was Mrs. Turner's reply.

"What everybody says is generally what nobody proves, Mrs. Turner," answered Blake, with unusual gravity, as he raised his hat and turned away.

There was silence in the party a moment.

"I do wish there were a law preventing officers from ever appearing in citizens' dress," said Mrs. Waldron, presently, as she looked after Blake, now sauntering up the row by Mrs. Heath's side. "They never look natural out of uniform."

"It improves Mr. Blake, anyhow," answered Mrs. Turner, whose cheeks were red and whose eyes were wrathful. "If he could wear a longer skirt to his overcoat it would hide still more of his defects. I wish he never wore a uniform. It would be a relief to have him go—and marry her—and quit the service."

Mrs. Waldron turned suddenly and looked in surprise at the flushed features of her neighbor who had spoken with such asperity. Her lips moved as though she would reply; but she curbed the impulse and held her peace.

It was dark by the time Mr. Blake stepped into the ambulance that was to take him to town, and nobody happened to be there when he started. Possibly this was in accordance with his own wish, for the vehicle had been ordered to "report," as the army expression goes, at his quarters at eight o'clock, and there it had been waiting nearly three-quarters of an hour. No one knew just what had become of the lieutenant. He

nad been seen having quite a long talk with Major Waldron at the major's gate. Thence he had gone to the hospital to see one or two men of the regiment who were convalescing from illness or wounds ; had walked to the doctor's quarters with Pease himself, and thence down to the quartermaster's stables, where the sergeant said he came to give some directions about the care of his horse in his absence. Then he went up the hill towards the guard-house.

But it was the sergeant of the guard who had a story worth telling the next morning after Blake was gone, and a very "sizable" yarn it was. Just after dark, he said, the lieutenant came to the tower and wished to see the prisoner, Jamieson, and Jamieson was brought out from the cell-room and taken inside the tower, the sergeant and the sentry retiring. In less than three minutes the lieutenant's voice was heard in accents that betrayed wrath and indignation. Every word was distinctly audible: "By God, sir!" he almost shouted, "if you were not an enlisted man and a prisoner under guard, I would hammer you into pulp here and now." Then the door was flung violently open.

"Sergeant, take that scoundrel back to the prison-room," he exclaimed, as he came forth, and without another word to anybody hastened away across the parade.

And that story, coupled with the fact that he had positively declined to see the man at all when Mr. Graham first asked it, gave people something to think about for several days after his departure. It was the last heard of Blake at Russell for a whole fortnight. Then the absorbing details of the lovely Ray-Sanford

wedding began coming in, the newspapers first, and the long, enthusiastic letters from Mrs. Stannard afterwards; and now the ladies, at least, had something far more engrossing to occupy their thoughts than the reports of Blake's violent language to the English prisoner. Presently, too, came orders for Jamieson's dishonorable discharge and transfer to a military prison for punishment; and, with Grimsby dead and buried and Jamieson lodged behind the bars, dressed in a convict's suit, and the ex-stable orderly of Freeman's troop suffering a similar fate, there was left no military member of the gang of robbers or conspirators of whom the garrison had either knowledge or suspicion except the quondam quartermaster's clerk and subsequent deserter, Burns, *alias* Howell, whom no man could lay a finger upon, for, despite the best efforts of the detectives, not a trace of him could be found.

Yet he was a man concerning whom Mrs. Granger's lawyer, who came out from the East this very month of June, made the most intricate and particular inquiries.

"Mr. Blake was the life of the wedding-party," wrote Mrs. Stannard. "I never saw him looking so well, never knew him to be more amusing. In his speech at the wedding-supper he fairly outdid himself, and everybody was in shouts of laughter before he finished. So many people hoped he would spend two or three days there, at least, and Major Stannard told me the men at the club were delighted with him and had planned a little dinner to be given in his honor the day after the wedding, but he left on an early-morning train, hardly saying good-by to any one, and he did not

tell us where he would spend his leave. I do hope he isn't going to—but I believe I'll not write anything on that point."

Yet everybody at Russell seemed to know what Mrs. Stannard meant, and hoped so, too. And now, with most of the garrison up on the distant slopes of the Big Horn, and the Rays on their wedding-tour, and Mrs. Truscott and Baby Jack visiting in the East, and the Stannards spending the summer among the mountains near the old home, and Mrs. Atherton and Mrs. Freeman, with the latter's children, at the sea-shore, and no Mrs. Granger at the depot to gossip about, and a new officer in charge there, and a new manager up at Bryan's ranch, there fell a cloud over social life at the post, and poor Mrs. Turner yawned and dozed and dawdled through day after day, lamenting that there was ever a need for field service of any kind. It took all the bachelors and beaux and dancing men away, as she had so often complained before. It did not seem to matter so much about the husbands.

And, then in the midst of all this humdrum, placid, uneventful life, there came sudden orders that took from them in the shape of gallants and defenders even that which they had. First, the trains on the Union Pacific were crowded with soldiers for a day or two, hastening eastward to protect the great cities against the mob violence that followed close upon the greatest railway strikes the country had ever known. And then, in less than a month, back they came, whirling westward with orders, for the cavalry at least, to march to the heart of the continent and at all hazards to head off and capture a strong band of desperate warriors

who, magnificently led, were striving to cut their way through a circle of foemen, many of whom would far rather have fought the men who wrought the original wrong. From small beginnings the war assumed proportions that became startling. The Indians marched and fought as never Indians marched or fought before, and with troops confronting them on every side, though only in skeleton battalions, they had burst through the cordon, crossed the great range, and were now heading for the settlements or the British line, no one could tell which, and every available man was spurred to the distant scene. Two weeks of rapid marching it would take to concentrate the —th, far up near the head waters of the Elk, and, just as the year before, the officers on leave came hurrying from their holiday,—Stannard from the mountains, Ray from the arms of his bride, Tommy Hollis from—no one knew just where, but he brought no crutches with him, and then the question that was asked by man after man, woman after woman, at the fort was, "Where on earth is Blake?" Mrs. Morris, who drove out from town quite frequently to hear the band and heed the news, and who was known to be in correspondence with Mrs. Granger, now said to be slowly regaining composure and health at a quiet resort among the Berkshire Hills, was questioned as to whether she had heard anything of that gentleman. "No! Mrs. Granger had not mentioned him at all." And Mrs. Morris's eyes faltered no more than did her tongue.

"Blake got a month's extension to his leave," said the post-adjutant in reply to frequent questioning. "It expires now on the 15th, so he's got to be here or with

the regiment in a week. Major Stannard and Ray caught up with the column before it reached the Sweetwater;—we got telegrams yesterday. Hollis followed from Green River on the next buckboard, but Blake hasn't been heard of."

"Well, Mr. Blake's troop is with the Big Horn battalion. He wouldn't go that way at all, would he?" asked Mrs. Wilkins, kindly.

"Yes, because everybody knows they will be ordered around to join the regiment at Clark's Fork or Cedar Mountain, somewhere thereabouts, and he could never catch them by following their trail. His best way is to join the Wind River column. He could reach them at old Camp Brown this week, and Billings telegraphed him, as he did to the others, the moment orders came for the campaign."

"Where was he then?"

"His address was care of the Athenæum Club. I suppose Billings told him about what date they would get away from the Wind River Valley, and he is timing his move accordingly. Perhaps, too, it was not forwarded promptly. Blake isn't a fellow to hang back when there's service ahead. I wish to heaven we were mounted, instead of loafing here, guarding a lot of old c—commissary stores and things."

"*Mr.* Foster! *I* heard you! You corrected yourself too late. You know perfectly well you were going to say a lot of old cats; and it's us you were thinking of," exclaimed Mrs. Wilkins, in counterfeit dudgeon.

"I wasn't," protested Foster, reddening, nevertheless, to the roots of his hair; "indeed, I wasn't."

"Then you meant us when you said a lot of old

things, you know you did, Mr. Foster," chimed in Mrs. Turner. "*Very* well, Mr. Foster, I shall know how much to respect your sincerity in the future. If this is a specimen of infantry gallantry, I'm glad we have so little of it." And poor Foster, unable to make himself heard, much less understood, in the face of such upbraiding, beat a quick retreat to his own quarters.

Yet he was glad to escape. He liked Blake well, and he did not like it that he had failed to appear. He had spoken to nobody but Major Waldron of a fact they both knew,—that the command was to begin its northward march from old Camp Brown in forty-eight hours, and that Blake could not now reach it before the start, though by hard riding he might still overtake it, following the trail over the frowning range of the Owl Creek mountains.

Two days more passed and still no Blake; on the contrary, there came anxious telegrams from Freeman and Billings just as they were leaving the outermost post: "Have you no news of Blake? Try to ascertain what is wrong." Waldron telegraphed to the Athenæum, and the reply stated that Mr. Blake had not been there for a month. All his mail had been sent to Montclair, Maryland, between the 5th and 20th of August, and since then letters were forwarded and despatches repeated, in compliance with his telegraphic orders, to Denver, Colorado.

"To Denver!" exclaimed Waldron, in genuine dismay. "Then he must have been within a hundred miles of us when the orders came for the regiment to take the field. That was ten days ago, and he hasn't turned up yet. Foster, either Blake is there so ill that

he does not know that this campaign is on and his troop in the thick of it, or else—— Oh, good afternoon, Mrs. Morris," said he, with a sweeping bow, as that buxom lady, all smiles and cordiality, drove by with some friends from town in the stylish landau that had once been Mrs. Granger's. "She is beckoning, Foster; what does she want?"

"The carriage is stopping in front of your quarters, sir; half a dozen ladies are there on the piazza."

"Well, we'll walk over there, then—but no word of this *there*. As I was saying, I'm troubled about Blake. Billings wired twice and Freeman once, and those despatches must have gone right on to Denver after him. He is not the man to shirk what promises to be a sharp campaign, especially in face of the news of that ugly fighting west of the range, and then, too, since he lost so much of last year's campaign. It would harm him infinitely if he failed to reach the —th in time. Do you know any one in Denver of whom we can make inquiries?"

"Nobody better than some of the Rocky Mountain detectives. They would find him in no time if he were there; and then if he is ill, why, I could run right down to him. But I simply can't believe, major, that he's there, with this campaign going on." And here they reached the landau, about which a number of garrison ladies were already joyfully gathering. It was Mrs. Morris who was speaking:

"I've only dropped in for a moment; I have to hurry right back to town. What message shall I take for you to Mrs. Granger? You know she came out to Denver some ten days ago to visit Judge Lawrence.

Some tangled matters about the major's estate she has to settle. I'm going down there to-morrow. You see I'm so anxious to join her again, poor dear, she's had such a sad, sad summer."

Mechanically the two officers raised their forage-caps as the landau bowled away, but neither spoke. It was Mrs. Turner who first gave utterance to the thought that had taken instant root in every mind.

"Mrs. Granger in Denver! Then all this time Mr. Blake was nearer at hand than we supposed."

CHAPTER XXI.

JUNE was lovelier still in the Berkshire hills. It was not yet time for the gathering of the devotees of fashion at Lenox, but at one of the quietest and most secluded little nooks close at hand there was ensconced a lovely widow, pathetic, pallid, and languorous; one whose exquisite face told the story of recent bereavement; one who sought no acquaintances, and whose only companion for a time was an elderly dame referred to more frequently by the villagers as "the widow's aunt" than by her registered name of Mrs. Morgan. Together these two sad-faced ladies spent hours in the open air and sunshine, clambering among the rocky heights, reading or sketching in shady corners, writing and receiving scores of letters, as the post-mistress was not slow to admit. "Her husband was a major in the army and was killed in the Indian war," explained that village authority, a statement which heightened the halo of romance that seemed from the outset to crown one so beautiful and so early widowed. There were some fashionables at a neighboring hotel, people who were determined to be in the hills during the blissful weeks in which society swarmed thither, and who, being unable to afford the expensive preliminary tour of the seaside resorts, had secured their rooms for the season at reduced rates, and were longing for some dis-

traction or entertainment during the weary days that must elapse before the coming of the leaders and the tide. These had called upon the lovely Mrs. Granger, putting on long faces as they would black gloves for deep mourning, and couching their expressions of interest and sympathy in that soft, soothing drawl which the sex holds in reserve for such occasions. Some failed to see the lady, but those who were more fortunate declared her charming, yet so inconsolable that she had begged them in deep emotion not to think her indifferent to their sympathy and kindness, but her bereavement was so recent, so sudden. "Stricken down in the flower of his years." She craved their forgiveness if she failed just now to return visits, and then tears, against which she had been struggling, overcame her utterly. People declared her so grateful, so charmingly apologetic, so sweet, so sad, so pathetic in her resignation, so devoted to her husband's memory, so very, very interesting. And the interest was redoubled, if the other attributes were not, when there arrived a tall young gentleman on crutches, and it was presently rumored that he was an officer in the deceased major's own regiment, who had gallantly risked his life to save that of his commander and was desperately wounded in the attempt. Then other versions began to be circulated. Then all the neighboring hill-sides seemed whispering the story of the devotion of the crippled soldier to the lovely relict of his commander. Ten days did that lovelorn youth hover at her side, but the evenings found him seeking, perforce, other comfort at the hotel. A sociable, a gregarious body was Tom, and when the lady of his heart coyly and chastely de-

clared that she could not see him after the dews of night began to fall, he was ready to be kindly interested in everybody as of old, and as a consequence he was soon pumped dry of all the truth in the matter, and the Rockminster people and the villagers were made ready for other sensations when it leaked out that the major had been mysteriously murdered, not killed in headlong charge upon the foe. Yes, only in the daytime was he welcomed at Ferncliff, and then their interviews were generally under the supervision of the elderly Mrs. Morgan, who, for propriety's sake, seemed ever present; and then one evening the lieutenant had come in with a rueful face, and called for his bill, which included a breakfast on the morrow of which he did not partake, and with the early train he vanished from view, and in twenty-four hours there arrived another whose appearance was attended by a circumstance the post-mistress did not fail to note,—there came no more letters from Ferncliff addressed to Lieutenant Gerald Blake, —th U. S. Cavalry, in the field, *via* Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, then at Fort Russell, Wyoming, then at the Athenæum Club, New York; and there came no more daily letters addressed in a bold, dashing hand to Mrs. S. L. Granger, Ferncliff, Berksville, Massachusetts. Other letters in abundance came and went, but the post-mistress well knew that this newcomer was the most assiduous of all the fair widow's correspondents, and, if frequency of reply could prove anything, the most favored. By an odd coincidence the clerk at the Rockminster gave Lieutenant Blake the very room recently occupied by his regimental comrade, the lively and lamented Hollis; but he did not men-

tion the fact then or thereafter, for the new arrival was as reserved and distant as Hollis had been jovial and approachable. A man among the guests felt sure he had met Mr. Blake in the Maryland mountains long years before, and ventured to introduce himself the night that succeeded the long-legged trooper's arrival. But Mr. Blake, though courteous, did not overflow with cordiality, and plainly showed a desire to be rid of the gentleman's presence. If the lovely widow had denied herself to one suitor in the sweet moonlit evenings of early June, she had no such scruples now when the chaste goddess of the skies was hiding her silvery face until after the midnight hour. The winning man seemed to have come in with the wane of the moon; and the Rockminster guests and garrison were to a man and woman condemnatory of her conduct as well as of her choice. How shallow a mockery was her plaintive grief! How strange that she should be receiving such attention so soon after her husband's most untimely taking off! Was it indeed untimely? Was it not possible that she had been receiving those same attentions before, and so heightened, if not hastened, the tragedy? Blake never came back to the hotel before eleven at night, and then simply took his key and went to bed. He had registered during the last week in June, and as more guests arrived and began to fill up the house in July, there came among them some army people who caught sight of him at the breakfast-table the next morning; but he passed out without notice of them. Major Dennis, of the artillery, with his wife and daughters, were of the party, and the major inquired at the office.

"Yes, sir, that's Mr. Blake," was the clerk's reply. So the major sent his card; so did Lieutenant Ayling, who was devoting himself to one of the daughters; and when these cards were handed Blake he looked any thing but overjoyed. He came forth from his room arrayed, evidently, for a tramp among the hills, with a pair of field-glasses slung over his shoulder. He greeted them with much apparent cordiality; was marched in and presented to the ladies, whom he had known as youthful matron and little girls in short dresses ten years before at Old Point Comfort; chatted nervously a few moments; then excused himself—"An engagement with friends, a walking party,—see you all this evening," and so hurried away.

But they saw him before evening, and the walking party consisted apparently of but one couple. The major's little contingent started out for a drive to Castle Rock, alighted from their wagon at the foot of the ledge, and, clambering up the narrow and tortuous pathway, came suddenly upon Blake and a lovely woman in deep mourning seated on a rustic bench in a bower of leaves. They all seemed to blush at the rencontre, though no one could explain why, and the major fell into a brown study, from which he emerged only half an hour later with the sudden exclamation:

"I have it, by Jupiter! I knew I'd seen her face before. That was Madeleine Torrance, dear, old Captain Torrance's daughter. You remember them at the Hygeia. Who was it she married? Some fellow at Washington in the staff."

"She married Major Granger," answered his wife,

"and he was killed or something out West last winter."

That night there was a singular occurrence. This was the 3d of July, and quite a number of people came up to spend the Fourth. The late train was crowded, so were the busses that came up from the station; but among the arrivals was Lieutenant Hollis, his crutches discarded, but limping along with a heavy stick. He greeted the clerk with the cordiality of an old friend:

"Say, old man, put me back in the same room I had before, will you?"

"Sorry, Mr. Hollis, but that's taken. It's occupied by a friend of yours, though;—belongs to your regiment, I believe,—Lieutenant Blake."

"Lieutenant Blake!" exclaimed Hollis, turning red, then white, then all sorts of colors. "Lieutenant Blake!" he repeated. "Are you—sure?" And the face that met the surprised gaze of the clerk was filled with actual consternation and perplexity.

"Why, certainly, Mr. Hollis. He's been here,—he came here the day after you left."

For a moment Hollis stood there as though powerless to move, his face getting grayer and grayer, his eyes vacant, his jaw relaxed. Then, as though suddenly aware that he was making an exhibition of himself, he whirled quickly away, and, still half-dazed, wandered out upon the broad piazza and sought the darkest corner. In half an hour, as he did not come in, a bell-boy approached him.

"Mr. Hollis, sir, supper's most over. The clerk says, don't you want some?"

"I believe not. Has-s—Mr. Blake got back? Has he been to supper?"

"No-o, sir; he ain't come; he don't come in to supper much."

Hollis slowly arose and hobbled back into the office. People who had known him came forward to greet him and were concerned to see the pallor of his face. To all inquiries he hurriedly answered he was well enough, only tired; a little sore from the jolting.

"That's a double room of Blake's," he said. "Can I not leave my things in there and get a wash before he comes in?"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Hollis. I'll send a boy with you. Have your trunk sent in there, too?"

"I didn't bring any; only came up for the Fourth, you know. Just send my bag in there."

Hollis would have followed the boy, but other sympathizing inquirers stopped him and he had to speak to ladies in the hall. The boy came back and handed him the key. It was ten minutes before he could break away, and then he hobbled down the familiar corridor, turned sharp to the right at the little passage leading to the old room, and came face to face with a burly man in a full beard. Only one room opened off the short passage—Number 27. The stranger saw the inquiry in the lieutenant's eyes.

"Beg pardon," he spoke, drawling his words somewhat; "I was looking for Number 23."

"You've passed it, out there in the corridor," said Hollis. And the stranger touched his hat and stepped away.

Unlocking the door, Hollis unhesitatingly entered,

and, striking a match, lighted the lamp on the dressing-table. Blake's trunk, closed and apparently locked, stood beside it. Some books, papers, neckwear, some studs and collar-buttons, a few cigars, etc., littered the table; other masculine gear was on the bureau. Two or three suits of summer clothing hung in the open wardrobe; but the drawers of the bureau were closed. Stepping quickly forward, he opened the uppermost. Collars, cuffs, handkerchiefs, neckties, and a lot of letters met his eye, and one or two envelopes, black-bordered, addressed in a hand he well knew. His frank, pale face darkened at sight of them. Carefully, scrupulously he pushed them aside until he could raise the corner and peer under the newspaper which, country-hotel-fashion, was spread over the wooden bottom of the drawer. Higher he lifted and farther he looked until at last his search was rewarded. There lay a couple of sheets of letter paper covered thickly with writing. These he quickly seized and examined. A muttered exclamation, as of relief, fell from his lips. He started to tear them to fragments, but suddenly bethought him that he could not leave those fragments there. Then, carefully he replaced everything in the drawer as he had found it, looking lingeringly at the envelopes addressed in that well-known hand. Then he sat him down and pondered a while, mopping his moist forehead, then burying his face in his hands. At last he rose to his feet, carefully closed the drawer and, without touching or disturbing another item of Blake's property, extinguished the light, took his bag and cane, locked the door behind him, and limped painfully back to the office.

"Is there any down-train to-night?" he inquired.

"Nine-fifty, sir; but you've had no supper. You're not going so soon, lieutenant?"

"Yes; I thought to find some friends here, but I hear that they are over at Mahopac. Just send my grip to the station, will you?—and I'll walk."

Under the beautiful old trees the hard-beaten pathway wound. How many a time, with halting gait, yet blithely-beating heart, he had climbed the long ascent that led to the bowered cottage up among the hills before him. How wild with hope, with joy and confidence, had he been when last he made his way under those whispering leaves late that lovely afternoon in June! The air was heavy with the perfume of roses; the very birds were stilled by the warmth and languor of the declining day. Hours of the night preceding that last visit he had sat there in the little room writing page after page to her, the woman he had so rapturously loved; yet nothing he could write seemed fit to lay before her. Page after page was rewritten, some copied, some destroyed; some which he thought had certain good points he laid aside to re-read; others, wild and impassioned, he stowed in that upper drawer under the paper, to re-read once more before retiring, to prompt him on the morrow when daring to put his fortune to the test. There they still lay when he returned, stunned, desolate, vaguely feeling that he had been lured and tempted only to be cast aside; yet so disarmed by her exquisite pathos, her pleading, her tears; so conquered by her self-accusation that he had implored her not to think of him and his misery; not to blame herself. It was all his fault, all his blind infatuation. It was enough for him now that he had won so sweet a

friendship. It was all he could ask as yet. It was enough to be assured that no other man stood nearer to her heart. He would obey her in everything. He would intrude upon her grief no more—just now.

"Oh, my friend, my friend!" she had said, while the tears dimmed her swimming eyes, "I ought to have known, I ought to have felt, that this must come; but in my selfish sorrow I did not dream of it. I was so blessed, so strengthened, so ennobled by your trust, your friendship, that I grew to crave it, and to lean upon it. I was so misjudged at the fort. I was so—so unhappy in my married life that your brave, strong spirit came between me and despair. I needed such a friend among such foes; I will need it still more in the future, and I had so counted on you—you to stand between me when those women and those men at Russell maligned me as they have and as they will. I knew that with you to defend my name they would be silenced, one and all. And now only the other day I heard how the tongues of scandal had coupled our names here, and only yesterday I realized that I must rob myself of my sweetest comfort and bid you go. It is for my good name's sake, my honor, dear friend, dear —Tom." And poor Tommy had knelt and kissed the lovely outstretched hand and limped away lamenting, yet loyal to the last.

And now, returning for one look at the loved face and to search for those mad, paroxysmal pages he had penned and characteristically left, he found Blake had come the day after his departure; had taken his room, and more than taken his place. What to say to him, what to say to her, he had not the remotest idea.

Some blind force was driving him up the well-beaten pathway that led to her summer home, the dainty refuge she had chosen. It lacked but half an hour to train-time, but he had wellnigh forgotten that. Perhaps all he hoped for was one look at the vine-clad walls that sheltered her.

He reached at last the wicket gate, stilling as much as he could the sound of his halting step and heavy cane. The windows of the little cottage were open; a bright light burned at the reading-table in the parlor; there sat Mrs. Morgan absorbed in a book. No one else was visible. He leaned against the great elm, deep in the shadows of the overhanging branches. Where was she? Where were they? The answer came soon enough. Slow-pacing footfalls caught his ear—the swish of a woman's trailing skirt upon the loose gravel. Almost before he was aware of it, they were upon him here at the little gate and about to enter. They were returning, evidently, from a stroll. The forms were dim and shadowy until they came between him and the light; then Blake's deep voice was heard, soft, low, and fond.

"One moment, my own."

And Hollis saw him bend over her; saw her queenly head thrown back; saw that her glorious eyes were uplifted to his worshipping face; saw her twine her arms about his neck; saw that their lips met in long, linger ing kiss; and then, his arm about her waist, her graceful form nestling in his embrace, they moved slowly to the cottage, and, with a gasp and stifled sob, poor Tommy turned away. He had seen more than enough. He never thought to look upon her face again.

That night, about eleven, Mr. Blake returned to the Rockingham, walked straight to the office and asked for his key. It was handed him with a couple of letters. He took them and hastened to his room. In three minutes he was back.

"Come with me at once," he spoke in low, stern tone, though his lips were twitching with excitement. "Everything has been ransacked, and I am robbed."

"Mr. Blake! It isn't possible," exclaimed the clerk. "Never has such a thing happened here." But Blake's only answer was, "Come and see," as he hastened away, the clerk at his heels.

The trunk was found burst open; the tray was out upon the floor; the contents were scattered about. The bureau drawer had been ransacked. The whole room was in confusion.

"How on earth could the man have entered? Not by that window, surely; it's too far from the ground. It must have been the door, and yet, what thief would dare pass the length of that corridor. Has anybody been here from the office?—any servant? any bell-boy?" asked Blake, hunting as he poke among his plundered possessions.

"Every servant in the house has been with us years, Mr. Blake. It was no employee of ours. Tell me quick what is gone?"

"I can't tell," said Blake, slowly;—"can't tell yet, at least, everything is in such confusion. I had no valuables here to speak of, nothing but letters and papers. Some of them I cannot find."

"Has nothing been stolen, sir, no jewelry, money?"

"Nothing. I had nothing except what you see there

and what is in the safe. It was not that the scoundrel wanted. Not that that he has taken," exclaimed the lieutenant, now on his knees among the scattered papers. "Has any one been here?" asked he, suddenly. "Has any one had access to the room?"

"Only one man, Mr. Blake; but we supposed he was an intimate friend of yours,—Lieutenant Hollis."

"What?" exclaimed Blake, springing to his feet. "What! In God's name, man, think what you are saying. Mr. Hollis here?—in my room?—to-night?"

"Yes, sir, he came on the up train at seven-thirty, and asked to go into your room to put on a clean collar before supper."

"Where is he now?" interrupted Blake, hoarsely. "Where is he now?"

"Gone, sir; on the nine-fifty south, over an hour ago. My heavens, lieutenant, I hope—I hope there's nothing wrong. I supposed he was a friend of yours, and everybody thought him a gentleman. It isn't too late, sir. I can telegraph down the road and have him arrested almost anywhere. Let me go and call Mr. Lord, the proprietor; he isn't asleep yet," and the clerk started for the door.

"No, stop!" called Blake, rousing himself from the half-stupor into which he was plunged. "Come back, —come back and promise me- -not one word of this to a soul—not one word to anybody, high or low. Promise me."

And with the morrow's sun Blake, too, was speeding away, leaving only a hurried note to explain.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE night train that bore Mr. Hollis southward was not crowded by any means, a fact that enabled him to get into a seat by himself and to barricade the unoccupied end of it with his satchel. The most sociable of men ordinarily, and eager to make himself agreeable to anybody and everybody, he felt now that the world had indeed betrayed him and that he was a wronged and defrauded man. His eyes having been at last opened, and having seen for himself the depth of the woman's duplicity, he recalled the many insinuations at her expense made by the ladies of the two regiments in which he had served, and the very broad hints poured into his unwilling ears by Mrs. Wilkins. "Peggy O'Dowd!" Mrs. Granger had laughingly exclaimed when he confided to that lovely charmer the gist of one of the allegations laid by Mrs. Wilkins at her door. Beyond that she was something Irish, Tommy had no idea who Peggy O'Dowd might be. He never read, if he could help himself, even the daily papers, than which no greater proof of his intellectual short-comings can be adduced; but he laughed because she laughed, and he knew it must be something witty that she had said.

But now with all his sorely wounded heart he wished that he had given some heed to Peggy's recent warning

that he would better look twice before he "lept wance." Mrs. Wilkins had actually scouted the idea of Mrs. Granger's really caring for anybody but herself. She craved admiration, adulation, worship, passion, perhaps, as an actress craves applause, yet, having won it, cares naught for the source from which it came. "If any man ever had a place in what she called her heart," said Mrs. Wilkins, "it was our Leggy Blake when he was young and good-lookun';" but she'd thrown him over before; she was playing with him now, and she'd throw him over, or any other man, for the next that came along. "She can no more be content without somebody making love to her than Crane can without whiskey," was her final clincher. But Tommy thought he understood her far better than Mrs. Wilkins ever could. How was that coarse, practical woman of the world to know of the depth of pathos, patience, resignation, of sweet Christian charity and forgiveness that lay beneath that polished surface? How could any one at Russell begin to know the suffering of her home-life, wedded to that cold, unsympathetic, soulless man of money who chilled her enthusiasm, rebuked her charity, repelled her confidences, rewarded her wifely constancy with cruel sarcasm,—dared to reply to her gentle pleadings with brutal blows. How lovely, how saintlike she was that night when she drew from him the unkind things the sisterhood at Russell had said about her! How exquisite a picture she made as she sat there, her hands meekly clasped, her sweet, sweet face downcast, two great tears trickling slowly down the velvet of her rounded cheeks; unresentful, uncomplaining. How incomparable she was when she

started to her feet, the majesty of misjudged and wounded womanhood in her mien, "*verâ incessu patuit dea*,"—a goddess in her walk, indeed, as she paced one moment the carpeted floor, then turning suddenly upon him, smiling winsomely through her tears, throwing back her lovely head, she held forth both her hands with such impulsive gesture: "There! we'll think no more about it. It is hard to be so—so misunderstood; but it is childish of me to mind it. How foolish, when I know well it is only because I have so much that they have not, because you are so loyally—my friend." Tom worshipped her, as indeed who would not? He had gone back fully determined to have a good talk with Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Raymond, and bring them to their senses. He even contemplated going to Mrs. Atherton and Mrs. Stannard, and assuring them how utterly mistaken people were in supposing Mrs. Granger heartless and vain and shallow. If they only knew how gentle and forgiving she had been towards them, surely they would relent. He had even gone so far as to attempt a beginning with Mrs. Turner; but that lady had promptly snubbed him with the remark that the subject was one that didn't interest her in the least, which was not true, although it was effective. He had even ventured on a word or two to Mrs. Wilkins, who burst out laughing in his face, and Tom couldn't stand ridicule.

And now to-night, as he sat by the open window, looking drearily out, not to note the shadowy landscape or the village lights that went flashing by, but solely because he could not bear to talk with any one, he was going over all these mournful reminiscences;

recalling all the warnings he had received, and wondering why it was that he had never made her speak of Blake, yet never realizing, even now, how like putty he had been twisted in her pretty fingers. And so, plunged in melancholy, he shut himself out from the world that but the month before had seemed so bright and beautiful, so full of love and gladness. One after another the occupants of the car sprawled themselves at length upon their seats and sought such slumber as the rushing train could afford them, and still poor Tommy sat there at his open window, gazing blankly out into the summer night and marvelling that the stars could shine so brightly when darkness impenetrable had settled down upon his life. At last, weary and desolate, he crossed his arms over the back of the seat before him, bowed his head, and wondered where to go when he reached the city. He could not bear the old haunts now. Where,—how could he spend the glorious Fourth and get away from the rest of the world?

The train had come to a stop, with the lights of the great city reflected in the southern sky. Three or four belated travellers jumped aboard. An out-bound express went rushing by as once again their own got under way, and presently he heard the voice of the brakeman accosting some one in rear of him.

"You got on at Berksville, I think, sir? Is this despatch for you?"

Berksville! Even now he could not hear the name without a thrill. Anybody coming from or going to the spot were she lived and moved possessed an almost tragic interest to him. He turned and saw a heavily-

built man of middle age, with smooth-shaven face and heavily-bowed spectacles, opening the brown envelope of the telegraph company. He seemed merely to glance at its contents and then looked up at the brakeman.

"Oh, ah! I beg pardon, I was half asleep I thought you said this was for me. I sometimes get despatches when travelling. I'm very sorry, but—it's not mine."

And then, before he could settle back as though to resume his nap, Hollis had caught a quick glance from his eye and had noted the heavy mould of his neck and shoulders. There was something familiar about them, but it was the despatch he was thinking of Could she already have learned of his being there? Could she have anything to say? Was it a recall? The brakeman, perturbed and troubled that he should have given the despatch to the wrong man, saw the expectancy in Tommy's eye and hastened to him:

"Are you Mr. Hollis, sir? That gentleman over there opened it before I could ask him his name. He got on at Berksville. I'm very sorry."

But Hollis hardly heard him. He had seized and was staring blankly at the paper.

"Lieutenant T. P. Hollis, U. S. Army, on No. 12

"Will follow by first train. Do not fail to meet me at Hoffman House at noon, 4th."

"GERALD BLAKE."

The man who had read the message, who had boarded the train at the last moment at Berksville,

whom he had never noticed at all before, was narrowly watching him now, his soft felt hat pulled down almost over his nose. "Do not fail to meet me at Hoffman House at noon." Hollis pondered over the words, unable to comprehend their meaning. Of all men on earth, the one whom he least desired now or ever hereafter to meet was Gerald Blake—her lover, her accepted, his successful rival. Yet how could he explain refusal or neglect? He had no engagement, nowhere to go, nothing to prevent. When the train rolled into the vast and dimly-lighted station he tossed his bag into a cab and bade the sleepy driver take him to the Hoffman forthwith. He never saw that the man in the seat behind him had left the car at a station far up-town.

The sleepless night had told upon him. He was lying on his bed next day, half dressed and more than half asleep, when there came the sound of footsteps and a sudden rap at the door, just as the city clocks were chiming twelve.

"Come in," he shouted, quickly turning over. The door was opened, and there, with white, angry face, stood Blake. Something in his very look checked the greeting that, despite himself and from force of habit, was on Tommy's lips.

"That will do; you can go," said his visitor to the bell-boy, who still hovered by, expectant of orders for the bar and concomitant quarters for himself. The youngster turned resentfully. Blake watched him until he reached the end of the corridor, entered, closed the door behind him, glanced doubtfully at the open transom, and then turned on his waiting comrade.

"Hollis, I did not know that you were a damned scoundrel."

"What do you mean?" was all the younger officer, amazed, could say.

"I mean that you robbed my trunk last night, and that I have come for those letters."

Stupefaction was the only word for it now. Hollis sat at the edge of the bed, thrusting his feet in his slippers; his collar and cuffs, coat and waistcoat discarded; he was gazing up at the other's white, menacing face, as though he thought him bereft of his senses. It was a moment before he could speak at all, then he stammered,—

"Upon my soul, Blake, I believe you're crazy."

"No temporizing, Hollis! By God, I begin to see through that Russell robbery at last! Dare you tell me you took no letters from my trunk last night?"

"What the devil do you mean by accusing me, Blake? I took nothing but what was my own, not yours."

And then, maddened by heaven only knows what feelings of wrath and indignation, Gerald Blake made one of the worst mistakes of his life. Perhaps he had hoped that Hollis would deny any and all knowledge of the act. Perhaps he was crazed by this tacit admission of a blackguardly crime. He hurled himself full upon the sitting figure, grasping savagely at the brawny brown throat, and in an instant, without a word, cry or sound but gasping breath and low, hoarse, inarticulate murmur, the two men were clinched in a desperate struggle. Wrath, fury, and the *élan* of attack gave Blake the first advantage,

and Hollis, utterly taken by surprise, was underneath. For an instant it seemed as though the latter would still have protested and reasoned, but Blake's fist had dealt one swift blow as Hollis thrust it from his throat; and now it was battle, and battle in mad earnest. In another moment it developed that the older officer was no match at all for the lithe, agile, muscular West-Pointer, whose every sinew seemed of steel, even in that crippled leg. A moment of hoarse panting, of fierce blows, of savage grapple, and then, with a crash that shook the windows and the floor, Blake was hurled backwards against the marble washstand and thence to the sill beyond, and there he lay, white, limp, and motionless.

Breathless, Hollis stood one moment glaring upon his prostrate foe, amaze and wrath contending for the mastery. Never heeding the blood streaming from the now re-opened wound in his thigh, and drenching a towel with water, he knelt and raised the humbled head. His hand was instantly covered with the hot flow from a deep cut at the base of the skull. Terrified, he sprang to his feet, pulled a bell-cord, and when the porter appeared bade him summon the house physician at once. It was ten minutes before the doctor came. Meantime, growing fainter every moment, Hollis had wrought in vain,—Blake lay stunned and apparently lifeless. Hollis could barely gasp the story to the physician.

"We are old friends and comrades," he said. "I believe he is crazy. He rushed in here ten minutes ago and fiercely attacked me, and this is the result."

That night both men were patients in the care of

the physician, who presently sent a note to the post-surgeon at Governor's Island. The end of the week found Hollis sufficiently restored to be limping around again; but it was a fortnight before Mr. Blake was allowed to sit up at all and read his letters.

Meantime, when five days passed by at Berksville, other people besides the lovely widow began to wonder why no letters came from Blake. Mrs. Granger, alarmed beyond expression, had at last telegraphed to the Athenæum, and the next day brought her a reply: "Mr. Blake has been ill, but doing well. Letter by mail." It was signed Athenæum Club, but when the mail was brought to her on the following day there was no letter from that point. There was one from her lawyer, which she set aside; there was one from Mrs. Morris, which was also passed over. The third was addressed in the familiar hand of Mr. Hollis, and she opened it with an odd sensation at heart, something akin to foreboding.

HOFFMAN HOUSE, NEW YORK, July 10, 1877.

"You are doubtless anxious about Mr. Blake, and, there being no one else available, I write to say that your letters to him are here, and that he will reply as soon he is a little stronger. He fell, striking the back of his head and sustaining an ugly cut; was knocked senseless and lost much blood before the doctor reached him, so that for several days he has been cautioned to keep very quiet. Doctor Griffin, of the army, is attending him, and pronounces him out of all danger, though weak. Friends are close at hand, so that he

wants for nothing they can give. I shall remain so long as I can be of use, and if I can serve you in any way, please do not hesitate to call upon

"Yours, most obediently,

"THOMAS P. HOLLIS."

Mrs. Granger turned white when she read this. "Then, despite my prohibition, Gerald must have told him, and he was here that night, as people said." She grew whiter still as she read her lawyer's letter.

"It may be necessary for you to come to Denver. I have had consultation with Judge Lawrence, but the parties refuse to communicate with him and they reiterate their demands. We probably could lay hands upon them by setting the detectives on their track, but your instructions are imperative, 'no arrests to be made.' There is still nothing to be heard of the man Brooks. He has disappeared entirely."

She turned and took from her desk another note, received two days before, postmarked New York, and written in a clerkly hand, though evidently disguised. It was brief enough:

"Either that money must be in our hands within the coming month or the proofs of his murder at your instigation, of *her* existence, and your letters to your lover, Blake, will be given to the world."

"My God!" she moaned, "and I have no one to advise, no one to aid me."

When, a fortnight later, Mr. Blake was considered well enough to be allowed to travel, Hollis had disappeared from the scene. Some letters addressed to the latter were returned to the writer at Berksville, he

having given no directions as to the forwarding of mail. Letters in similar envelopes and superscription were carried up to Mr. Blake's room from time to time, and presently brief notes were despatched in reply. About the 20th of July two ladies arrived one morning, were received with much courtesy by Doctor Griffin, and shown to their rooms. Later Blake was assisted down into the parlor and had a long interview with the younger and fairer one—the dame in the deep, deep mourning. Doctor Griffin found him rather worse as a result, and cautioned him to remain quietly in his room for another day or two.

"Mountain air is what you're needing, now," said Griffin, "and absolute freedom from excitement."

The ladies returned to Berksville, and then it was noted that Mrs. Granger seemed looking far from well. She was pallid and harassed. The sketching tours were abandoned. The men, who came up Sundays, and only saw her in church, thought her saint-like in her loveliness and devotion. The women, who had been there through week after week, thought her anything but saint-like, and that devotion was what she lacked—the devotion of a lover. Nobody was surprised to hear that the beautiful widow found the air oppressive now and desired to sublet her cottage. A tenant for August and September was easily found. They packed their trunks and flitted away, and Mrs. Hagadorn, the post-mistress, said their letters were forwarded to Mont-clair, somewhere in the Blue Ridge. Early in August Blake applied for a month's extension to his leave and got it. The ladies were by this time safely installed in the roomy old resort where, ten long years before,

he had met and worshipped Madeleine Torrance, and thither was he bidden to come and worship anew. Here he spent a fortnight of bliss, slowly regaining strength, basking all day long in the love-light in those glorious eyes, yet marvelling at her pallor and nervousness, her fits of abstraction. And late in the month a letter came whose contents she did not show him, but he found her prostrate and weeping.

"Gerald! Gerald!" she cried, "they say I had him murdered that I might marry you. They say they have a host of witnesses and that only money will stop their tongues, only money will buy back those mad letters. Judge Lawrence bids me come to Denver at once."

And though he knew no letter written during Granger's life was among those stolen from his trunk, and though he implored her to let the lawyers place detectives on the track and run the scoundrels to earth, and declared it all a villanous blackmailing scheme, she shrank, she said, from the shame and scandal their arrest would surely bring about. She must go, go and buy them off. She had known for nearly three weeks now that the letters were indeed in the possession of some unscrupulous foes; for the missives that came in the clerkly hand were filled with quotations of her own words. She had forbidden him to employ detectives to trace the robber, whom he now believed to be none other than one of the Brooks' gang; for in his convalescence the doctor had given him a brief, cold note from Hollis, in which the latter told him that all he had taken from the room was the page or two he himself had written and left under the paper in the upper

drawer; but that, now that he knew of the robbery that must have occurred after he left, he had written Mr. Lord about the burly, bearded stranger whom he found in the passage-way, and of the burly, spectacled stranger who went down with him on the train. Mr. Lord and the clerk had both written Blake that this man was undoubtedly the thief. He had not even registered, but had sauntered in among the other guests, apparently looking for friends; had inspected the register and key-board, and had disappeared as suddenly as he came. Hollis told Blake that no apology need be tendered. He knew of nothing now that could atone for the wrong Blake had done him. The severe injuries the latter had sustained were his own fault.

The time had been when Blake believed that the love and companionship of that exquisite woman would make him forget the world. She loved him. She had promised to be his wife just so soon as her affairs could be disentangled and the conventional period of mourning be over. And yet he was vaguely troubled. Bitterly he moaned his mad injustice to Hollis. Ruefully he sought for some comrade to make peace between them. He longed for Ray, whom Hollis enthusiastically believed in, but Ray was away on his wedding-tour, "doing" the Thousand Isles and lower St. Lawrence. He could not intrude on the honeymoon joys with trouble such as this. He could not tell Ray what had happened without announcing the existence of an understanding, if not an engagement, between him and Granger's widow, and this she forbade, and he, too, shrank from, for the simple reason that he knew how Ray would regard the matter. A few months agone

and he would have looked with joy upon the prospect of being her escort anywhere. Now he looked with ill-concealed anxiety to see whether any one whom he knew was on the train that bore them westward. Mrs. Morgan was fatigued and begged to stop over one night in St. Louis, but Blake urged them on. They were in Denver,—she at the Lawrence's, he at the hotel,—on the 28th, and the next day, following a clue furnished her by her legal adviser, Blake pushed out westward over the range to Leadville.

"They will not deal with any one they do not know, Gerald," she had said. "You alone can help me; you alone can save me from life-long misery, or I would not let you go."

"Watch the despatches," he said to her in reply. "Those Indians are coming across the Rockies near the Yellowstone Park. If they do, the —th will go sure, and I must be with them. Get all telegrams that come for me and repeat instantly anything from the regiment."

She promised, and he was gone; gone, and within twenty-four hours not one, but three despatches were in her hands, repeated from New York.

"We take the field at once," they said. "Where will you join us?" asked Billings. "Your horse and field-kit with us," said Freeman. "You can catch us on the wing." "Ray leaves New York, Pennsylvania road, Thursday night; Stannard meets him Pittsburg. Wire them," was Billings' next message. She could repeat these to him and they would reach him within the next day or two; but she hid them from sight of all.

Five days passed, then came a hurried line: "I have just seen a Denver paper, saying troops from Cheyenne and elsewhere had been sent to the field. Your letters make no mention of it. Wire me at once whether you have examined all mail and telegrams. Are you sure there are no orders from Russell?" And still she delayed reply, until there came on the morrow an imperative despatch:

"I must give up the search and return instantly, unless you wire there are no despatches for me."

And then she telegraphed: "*No orders whatever.* Have you not succeeded? Offer more, if need be."

Late at night, five days afterwards, hollow-eyed, haggard and covered with dust, a traveller strode into the office of the hotel in Denver. A young gentleman in civilian dress sprang forward to meet him.

"Blake, old man, where on earth have you been? We thought you must be ill, and Waldron sent me down to hunt for you. They told us your despatches were forwarded here."

"Has the —th gone?" asked Blake, white to his lips.

"Gone? Heavens, yes, man! They'll be out of all reach now——"

"Where are my telegrams?" interrupted Blake, turning fiercely on the clerk.

"We gave them, three of them, to the lady who came with Judge Lawrence. Her name was Mrs.——"

"Hush," said Blake. "That's—that's enough."

And then Mr. Foster saw that something was indeed wrong; for his tall friend sank helplessly into a chair.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE campaign was over and, so far as the —th was concerned, it seemed almost before it began. Instead of swooping down into the wild and beautiful valleys that opened towards the storied Big Horn from the west, the hunted foe had turned northeastward, and, with marvelous pluck and skill, forced their way far down into the lowlands of the Yellowstone, thence northward towards the border. Couriers, recalling Atherton and the —th, reached them only when they had penetrated to the very confines of the National Park, and then came the long, long homeward march. Leisurely now they wound through the wild and picturesque valleys of the Ishawooa, the Gray Bull, the Meeyero. Magnificent were the frowning, storm-capped peaks at the west; bold and precipitous the divides between the rushing streams; glorious the sweep of mountain scenery on every side, as the returning troopers rode buoyantly along. Once more the guidons fluttered across the Owl Creek range; once more the camp-fires twinkled in the Wind River Valley; once more the sturdy horses quenched their thirst in the foaming Popo Agie, then breasted the lofty barrier bluffs that shut off the valley of the Sweetwater beyond. Long dusty days they jogged eastward over the old Mormon trail, following the

lead of their soldier colonel, to whom every bend was familiar. By Devil's Gate and Independence Rock their standard floated on its homeward way. Once more they plunged into the rushing waters of the Platte; once more they sighted from afar the bare brown roofs and walls of Fetterman, perched on its barren height, ugly, forbidding, yet ever hospitable. Again the long column plashed through La Prêle and La Bonté, streams so well known to the old trappers and voyageurs, and the bivouac fires gleamed in the mirror faces of the rock-framed pools. Again they swung their broad-brimmed hats and cheered the familiar sight of the old Laramie stage, lunging down the Chugwater bluffs, only two days' march from home; and all along the way, night after night, there had been wondering talk as to how it was and why it was that Gerald Blake had never joined. He who was once the life of every camp-fire, the centre of every group, the jolliest, merriest of all their number, why was he silent, why was he absent now?

When Atherton chose to keep his own counsel no man need try to coax him to speak. Stannard, Freeman and Ray were in sore perplexity. They were deeply attached to Blake, yet seemed powerless to serve him now in the black blight that had come upon his name. Atherton simply would not talk of the matter at all. It must wait, he said, until they had reached the winter station. Fierce and desperate fighting had taken place. Many a gallant officer and man had been laid low. The —th had only by accident failed to get its share of the dance. There was every probability when they took the field that they would be as

sharply engaged as were the detachments that grappled with the Indian on his way. No soldier who valued his honor or his good name could afford to hang back; yet throughout the —th to-day it was well understood that Gerald Blake was only a few hours' ride from them when the summons came; that, while Stannard, Ray and Hollis had fairly rushed to join their comrades from the far-distant East, Blake, who that very day was known to have been in Denver and expectant of despatches from his regiment, had seen fit to remain in hiding and send no word whatever until a fortnight after. It was known that Atherton had received a despatch from him among the papers brought by courier just about as they reached Cedar Mountain, just a day or so before they turned back, and that Atherton had directed Mr. Billings to notify Blake that he might return to Russell,—his services would not be required with the column,—or words to that effect. Letters which came from Russell and met them on their homeward way said that Blake eventually arrived there, but that no one saw anything of him,—he seemed simply stunned. Stannard, Ray and Freeman again stood stanchly by their friend and declared that they felt certain everything would be explained. The colonel had intimated that everything would have to be explained the moment they got back to Russell. Billings would not speak of the matter at all,—he could not, being adjutant; he only knew that Blake had followed the regiment as far as Old Camp Brown and was trying to get forward from there when the orders came recalling them from the field. The Indian scouts who were entrusted with the

despatches took four days to catch the regiment and six days to get back to Brown, where poor Blake had fretted himself into a fever and was under the doctor's care. "Pills" would not let him see the adjutant's formal reply until two days after the Indians brought it. Then he shipped him down by easy stages to Stambaugh, Atlantic, and Big Sandy, and so on back to Russell. "He was a sick man after he came to Brown," said the doctor; "but all right, physically, at least, when he reached there."

"What stampedes everybody," said Clark, "is the fact that 'Legs' got the telegrams sent by Billings and Freeman, and yet made no reply."

Every man was grave and sad when the case was discussed, but there was one who, looking grave and sad and several years older, could not be dragged into the faintest expression unfavorable to Blake. He even went so far as to declare that it was his belief that Blake never got those telegrams until too late. And that man was Tommy Hollis.

Freeman and Ray shook hands with Tom and thanked him and begged him to tell them how he knew; but Tommy would not. He turned red, stammered, and said he really didn't know, couldn't prove it, but, all the same, he would be willing to bet. Not until they reached Camp Brown on their homeward way did the letters from Russell meet them with the significant news that Mrs. Granger was at Denver all this time; and then men stopped conjecturing the cause of Blake's detention.

But the days were blacker still for Blake when the dear old regiment hove in sight over the distant divide

to the north, and the band went far out on the prairie to meet them, and the whole post turned out to bid them welcome. He had sought Major Waldron's permission to go forward to the Chugwater and join them there, and, to his dismay, Waldron hemmed and hawed and was visibly disconcerted, but finally stammered out,—

"I'm heartily sorry I cannot say yes, Mr. Blake; but in point of fact, Colonel Atherton thinks you should not see the regiment until he has seen you, which will be just as soon as he arrives."

Blake shut himself in his room, and there Ray rushed and found him; there that night Stannard, Freeman, and Truscott came to counsel and sympathize, but he could not be comforted. Asked if the despatches had not reached him in time, he said they had reached Denver before any one but the colonel and Billings had started. He could have caught the command by the 2d or 3d of September, but for—but for his own fault; he had failed to make proper provision to have those messages forwarded to him. He was out towards Leadville when they reached Denver.

The colonel was very cold and formal. He had a theory of his own after learning that Mrs. Granger had been at Denver all the time. He asked Blake how it was that other letters were forwarded to him unerringly, and that these most important despatches were withheld. The question was point-blank.

"I can only reply, sir, that they did not reach me," was Blake's answer, "and that the fault was entirely my own."

But Atherton felt that there was something back of

all this. He had heard from Mr. Foster that the clerk at the hotel had delivered those despatches to somebody who came with Judge Lawrence, and Atherton believed that somebody to be Mrs. Granger. He believed further that this charming Delilah had betrayed the man whose infatuation for her was such that it compelled him to silence now when his own honor demanded speech. Atherton saw that Blake could not defend himself except by dragging her name into the case. He liked him none the less because he would not take refuge behind a woman's wrong; but all the same he felt that the discipline and integrity of the regiment demanded that Blake should be given a lesson,—that he should be put and kept under the ban for the time being. And so, considering it no case for arrest or charges, he plainly and properly and sternly censured the senior lieutenant for his failure to join them for the field.

The man, it may be remarked, who was most scandalized by Blake's conduct was Mr. Crane.

"Do you mean he isn't going to demand a court of inquiry?" asked that sensitive gentleman. "If it was me I'd never rest till I'd had one," he declared. Whereat the "youngsters" laughed.

But even to his intimates poor "Legs" had made no mention of her name. One and all, the gentlemen of the regiment felt that he was right. No matter how deep the censure, he could seek no vindication; he must simply bear his load in patience until opportunity was afforded him to redeem himself. Stannard and Freeman, Truscott and Ray had a quiet consultation; had decided that while he must be made to feel that

their faith and friendship was not staggered in the least, the course he had chosen was doubtless the true one,—to bear his burden and to make no moan. They would see to it that no one was allowed to impugn his motives in holding back; but even to themselves they mourned his supposedly hopeless and unconquerable passion for Granger's widow. They wondered whether now he would not break with her for good and all. Devoutly they hoped that he might.

And then Captain Ray had to hurry on to his troop, and as soon as he had seen them safely housed for the winter he applied for permission to return to his status of "absent with leave," which leave he had thrown to the winds when the regiment took the field. Truscott, too, got a long leave and went East to join Grace and baby Jack, and Freeman, to his huge delight, and almost everybody's satisfaction—(Nobody can ever do anything or get anything in the army without somebody's being—to use a newspaper expression—"disgruntled")—Freeman was summoned to staff duty at division headquarters, a most deserved compliment. Stannard was ordered to take command of a new post being built up among the hills. Buxton, the senior captain, returned from recruiting service and took the Freeman's quarters, and to Blake, at least, the whole social atmosphere of Russell had undergone a change very much for the worse. The jolliest, merriest fellow of the old days went silently about his duties as commander of Freeman's troop; withdrew from the bachelor mess, not without earnest protests from Clark and Dana and Hunter, and kept house all by himself, living in a desolation of spirit that no one even faintly conceived;

for no one knew how deep, how very deep, was the wound that laid him low.

In speaking of the night on which he had found Blake in Denver, Mr. Foster said to Waldron that he had evidently just arrived from the mining camp; that he had been away nearly a fortnight; that nothing could describe his dismay and distress when he heard that it was too late to overtake the troops. "There was no train north until noon next day," said Foster, "and he was nearly mad with nervousness and trouble." He did not go to bed, but paced the floor most of the night; Foster heard him, and, when morning came, having shaved and changed his dress, he was still looking terribly ill. But even Foster knew nothing of what took place in those weary hours that dragged by while they were waiting for the northward train. With a little packet, sealed and corded, in his hand, Blake had gone to Judge Lawrence's and asked for Mrs. Granger. He was shown into the parlor, and in two minutes, for she had received telegraphic notice of his coming, she came fluttering down, closed the hall-door behind her, all aglow with joy, gratitude, relief, delight; had turned as though to throw herself in his arms, but she stopped and the color fled instantly from her face, the light died from her eyes; she read discovery in the first glance at his face.

"Gerald!" she managed to falter, "what—what has happened? Why do you——" But he checked her with uplifted hand.

"Let me report the end of my mission," he said, in tones that trembled far more than he wished, though his voice was deep and stern. "Here are your letters;

no money was needed. On this score, at least on my account, you can never be disquieted again. So my trust has been fulfilled. And now what have you to say of yours? Where are those despatches?"

"Do not speak to me like this? You terrify me, Gerald. In God's name, what does it mean? Of what do you accuse me?"

"Of betraying me, of compassing my dishonor and disgrace; of lying, in fact. Where are those orders?"

"Gerald, I swear to you there came no orders. I told you the truth—no orders whatsoever."

"Those despatches, then; those summonses to the field with my regiment, where this very day, for aught I know, they are battling with the Indians and jeering at me for my desertion. Where have you hidden them? Why? My God, Madeleine, why did you not forward them?"

"Gerald, Gerald!" she cried, sinking on her knees, the ready tears starting to her eyes, "I swear to you I meant no wrong. They were not orders; they did not even bid you come. You were on leave. You did not have to go, and I knew that if you saw them you would be restless, unhappy. You would want to leave me, Gerald, and I loved you,—needed you so. Oh, darling, don't blame me!"

But he never drew nearer, never stooped to raise her. One moment he was silent, then once more he spoke:

"How can you look me in the face and lie? I warned you that the —th would almost surely go. I warned you those despatches were almost sure to come. You promised—you promised to send them at once, and you broke your word utterly, as you have broken

me. Where are those despatches, I say? I want them and at once."

"Gerald, on my sacred word, they were not important. They said nothing about your coming. One was from Captain Freeman, and the other from the adjutant, merely to tell what routes some officers would take. You could not mean—you did not mean that when I was here, in desperation, almost, over these troubles, that you would leave me; you on whom I had learned to lean; you for whose sake I have suffered such calumny, curses, blows; you whom I loved so—so wildly? Oh, how could you, how can you, be so cruel!" And now she had risen and thrown herself weeping upon the sofa—upon one end of it, leaving ample room for him to come and surrender and console; but he never moved. He waited sternly until she had ceased her sobs and peeped up over the handkerchief to note their effect, wondering at his silence.

"I have no time for further words now. I go at once to join the regiment, wherever it is. Surely those despatches contain some instructions. What have you done with them?"

"I haven't them, Gerald. I read them, and when you wired that you were coming at once, I supposed others had reached you. You didn't say you had recovered the letters. You——"

"I said exactly what we agreed I should say if successful in that quest. I got the letters a week ago. It was other matters that kept me there. I was on the track of that man Brooks, and I believe that I could have jailed him; but it's too late now. Where are

my despatches? In God's name get them. You have done harm enough."

"I thought there was no further use of them, and—I burned them, Gerald. Indeed, indeed, I meant no wrong."

One moment, just one moment more he stood there quivering, his face ashen in its pallor, then, with sudden turn, he sprang to the door, out to the hall, out into the sunshine of the open street. "To the Western Union office, quick," she heard him order his driver, as he jumped into the cab that stood at the curb, and away sped the team, she peering at them from the parlor window.

But when the cab whirled around the corner and disappeared from sight, she bent and picked up from the floor the precious packet of letters, wiped the tears from her eyes, broke the seals and strings, turned the contents over with rapid, though trembling fingers. She had verified them before she ran up-stairs to Mrs. Morris, for that lady said so long afterwards,—after they, too, had parted; but that, as Kipling says, is another story.

When a woman knows herself to be very much to blame, it is not an unusual device to appear very much aggrieved and to attempt to put the other party on the defensive and in the wrong. Especially is this the case with a woman of Mrs. Granger's stamp. At such times she retires to a semi-seclusion, and suffers and writes pathetic notes reciting her wrongs, and attempts to extort an explanation from the person really aggrieved, instead of hastening to make amends herself. I have even known one or two persons re-

ferred to in society as men, to do pretty much the same thing. Mrs. Granger, in pursuance of this policy, wrote reproachfully to Blake. What she intended to do was to fetch him back to her feet again, humble and penitent. That she had done him bitter wrong was something she could not for an instant admit. Of course, if he got those messages he would be stupid enough to feel called upon to throw up any other avocation and make a dash for that very much over-rated corps, the —th, and just now she had urgent need of his services. He perhaps could get those letters back and possibly silence her anonymous persecutors, some of them, at all events, if nobody else could. There were others of whom she had never yet spoken to Blake. The death of Grimsby was a matter of boundless relief to her. There would come no more demands from him for hush-money. If only she could feel sure he had not told all he knew to that venomous girl Annie,—Annie, whom Mrs. Morris declared to be even now in service out at the fort, where people were ready to believe any ill of her widowed and desolate self. She had no hope of Blake's hearing anything of the whereabouts of the scoundrel whom of all others she most feared,—that fellow Brooks, who knew the secret of her husband's peculations in the past and other matters, and who, if her bribes were discontinued, might tell the whole story and present the proofs that would rob her of more than half the worldly goods with which the major had endowed her. She needed it all so very much more than the government. She did not know that Blake had succeeded in securing an interview with that very party. The hush-money, which had been systematically paid

during the major's life, she would gladly continue, provided it would ensure silence: but the gang, or whatever it was, had trebled, quadrupled the demands and threatened her personally with direful exposures if denied. Brooks, she knew, would keep out of the way, but his associates in crime might not be easily placated, and Gerald, being hot-tempered, might perchance put one or two of them out of the way. They, perhaps, might put an end to him,—a tragic possibility, but one she seldom allowed herself to contemplate. Still, if worst came to the worst, was it not better that he should die in her service than in that of an ungrateful republic? Mrs. Granger, it must be confessed, thought so.

He had been successful, then, in so far as the recovery of her letters was concerned, but she needed to know much more, and he had gone without telling her how he had obtained the packet, whom he had seen, or what she might expect from Brooks in the future. It redoubled her desire to hear from Blake, and the reproach and protestation in her letters was indeed pathetic. But a fortnight passed; no answer came; Mrs. Morris went home to Cheyenne and wrote that Mr. Blake was ill at some obscure point far up in the Wind River Valley; two weeks later that he had returned to Russell and the —th was coming home. Then Mrs. Granger wrote again. She implored him to come to her, if only for an hour. She had no excuse for longer stay at the Lawrences. She must return to the East. She could not go without one kind word from him. Her heart was breaking at the thought of his anger and injustice, and of all the troubles in which she was involved, and she no longer had him to help and sustain her. Other

demands had been coming in. More money was the cry, and she dare not tell Judge Lawrence, for fear that he would insist on legal process. She even humbled herself and said that she was beginning to hear something of the troubles in which he was involved, and for which she feared that in her blind misery she had been much to blame. She was beginning to see it all now. Would he not come to her? forgive her, and let her love, her undying devotion make amends for the sorrows of the past? Judge Lawrence had been to see Colonel Rand, and had extracted from him the acknowledgment that no case could be made by the government against the estate of Major Granger, except for a few trivial amounts which she would be only too glad to pay. She would sell out all the western property at once. She would be independent, could live abroad, anywhere away from the horrible, haunting scenes of her life with that cold and cruel man. She was ready to brave the opinion of the world, and be her Gerald's wife and go with him to the end of creation; but not to face the coterie around Cheyenne. Why could he not cut loose, once and for all, from the hollow, heartless, soulless associates by whom he was surrounded, by whom he was never appreciated, by whom she heard he was even now coldly treated. Her heart raged with indignation at the idea of those men and women at Russell daring to sit in judgment on him, her hero, her defender, her noble Gerald. "I must leave here within the week," she wrote, "so answer me, Gerald, if only a single line."

And so the line was sent, and with it by express a little packet with her recent letters.

The days later came stirring news. The Indians in the valley of the Porcupine, two hundred miles away, had risen against their agent. He begged for troops at once. The guard of infantry could protect him, but would be powerless to arrest the leaders of the outbreak. Two troops from Russell must go at once, said the orders; and so a biting winter expedition was before them, with every probability of sharp battle as additional incident. Even as people at the post were deploring the coming of the order and wondering who would have to go, Mrs. Turner came tearing out from town with the tidings which dwarfed in her mind the news of further field duty,—Mrs. Granger was coming up from Denver to spend a few days with Mrs. Morris, "on account of important business," before returning to the East.

Within ten minutes of the time the orders came everybody seemed to know that Gregg's troop stood first for detached service on the roster, and would probably have to go; and Gregg's face was very grave as he walked homeward from the office. Many knew that before long the resounding knocker on Gregg's front door would be entitled to its muffling knot of white ribbon, and that it would be hard news indeed, now, for Mrs. Gregg, if the captain were compelled to leave her.

Blake, coming over from his company quarters all alone, as he preferred to be of late, changed color when Clark told him the news of the *emeute*. Instantly, however, with kindling eye and quick step, he started to head off Gregg, who had almost reached his home.

"They say it's your troop, Gregg. It won't be if I can help it. I want to go."

The colonel was already in his office, and thither hastened Blake. Before sunset the orders were issued. Before sunrise the little detachment was on its way, Blake riding at the head of Freeman's troop. And everybody knew that he had begged to go in place of old Gregg, and all at Russell rejoiced, not that he had gone from them, but from her. No one dreamed how many moons it would be before Gerald Blake came back to them again.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AGAIN the snow-clouds hovered over the bleak and barren hill-sides; the little tufts of buffalo-grass shivered in the biting wind; the sentries turned out in their winter overcoats and fur gauntlets, and the broad surface of the parade, with the bordering road-way, was hard and solid as the bed-rock far beneath. Again the monotonous routine of garrison life, unchanging, uneventful, yet not always placid, had fallen to the lot of the —th.

"People are stupid at Russell this year," said a certain fair Cheyennese; "you ought to have been here last season when we had hops and germans and theatricals. There was such a charming set at the fort then; but it has all broken up. The colonel's in mourning, the Freemans and Truscotts and Stannards are gone, Mr. Ray is married, so of course he is more than gone, Mr. Blake is off at some awful cantonment among the Indians, and Mr. Hollis, who used to be the very life of our society, doesn't go anywhere. We invited him to Thanksgiving dinner, but he wouldn't come. He said he was on guard, but we heard later that it wasn't his detail at all,—he exchanged tours with somebody else. A year ago he was always getting up dances and calling on everybody here in town; now he never comes in at all." The lady thought it was very strange,—

that is, she said she thought so; but perhaps all this was simply to extract an opinion from Mrs. Morris, who was present. Down in the depths of her consciousness the speaker felt well assured of the cause of Tommy Hollis's temporary retirement from metropolitan society. Thanksgiving day had come and gone; Mrs. Granger had come and stayed.

Whatsoever might have been the important business that brought her once more to the scene of her social triumphs and domestic sorrows, it must be admitted that she succeeded in baffling the good people, both in or out of the army, who were sufficiently interested in her movements to speculate as to the motives. Those who scouted the explanation of business and declared she had come to recapture Blake, and would go now that he was settled beyond her reach, were silenced by the fact that, instead of going, she sent for certain trunks that had been checked through and proceeded to unpack them and make herself at home at the Morrises. Then it transpired that Morris brought a distinguished lawyer to call upon the lovely widow, and they had a long, long consultation. Then the lawyer got to coming without Morris, but evidently with his knowledge and approval. The legal luminary was a widower, a man prominent in political affairs and eminent in his profession. It began to be rumored that certain knotty questions regarding Granger's title to valuable property were being unravelled by this gentleman with a celerity and dash that put Judge Lawrence's more conservative methods in the shade. Then Morris, the banker, rubbed his hands and chuckled when people sounded him as to the widow's

financial hopes and prospects, but would say nothing definite, yet looked untold thousands. Week after week the fair subject of all this engrossing talk lingered under the banker's hospitable roof, and Mrs. Morris revelled in the enhanced interest of her own social position. Of course the ladies from Russell came and called. Of course all society people in Cheyenne did likewise, and the manner of Mrs. Granger to one and all whom she received was simply charming, "so gentle and so sweet, so pathetic, yet in no wise intrusive about her troubles." The new rector of the little parish was presently warmly interested in her. Such patience and resignation in her deep affliction was something positively edifying. The rector's young wife thought with him, for the first month, at least, and fought with him the next.

"If that woman is to have anything to do with the Christmas-tree, I simply want nothing to do with it," was the spirited ultimatum laid down, and by this time the little lady had many sympathizers. There is only one social position harder to fill than that of a minister's wife. The woman who can succeed in pleasing everybody as "the lady of the commanding officer" in a bustling garrison could charm the most discordant parish that ever squabbled.

Mrs. Granger was a regular attendant at every service from the day of her arrival. Her lovely face under the widow's cap attracted instantly the attention of the brilliant young churchman who had chosen the far frontier for his earliest efforts, who was of a family distinguished and wealthy, who had means and ability both, yet had gladly taken the little parish where

lambs were few and the black sheep swarmed in every fold, eager to try his metal against the devil and all his works as exemplified in a wild Western town, where he was told he would have hardly anything to deal with but sinners, scoffers, and soldiers. Forewarned, forearmed, he had come to fight the good fight, a Christian warrior proud to battle for the banner of the cross; thirsting to measure steel with the destroyer; burning for opportunity to grapple with the henchmen of the world, the flesh, and the devil wheresoever found. Cheery, kindly, full of high courage, he explored the streets and the market-places and the stalls of the money-changers, looking every man in the eye; ready with outstretched hand and cordial word to help the helpless; ready to kneel at the side of the brawling sinner, dying with boots on his feet and curses on his lips; eager to shield and succor the fatherless and widow; to give up his own substance and beg of the bounty of others for the sake of the hungering little ones, bereaved and destitute; daring to face disease and pestilence that he might bear the word of God and the gifts of men to the sorely stricken; shunning no danger, dreading no sneer, facing the foe with a heart brave, buoyant, and enthusiastic; winning, despite their sullen selves, the respect and confidence of hardened men, winning welcome and smiles in faces long set to sneer, winning the love and trust of little children who clung to him on his way, clamoring for a romp or a story. In three months from the time he came the little parish church would not begin to hold the throngs that gathered to hear him tell the old, sweet story. Rough men touched their battered hats

when they met him on his daily rounds. Reckless women hushed their shrill laughter and hid their painted cheeks when the rector passed them by. Roistering groups, clustering at the saloon doors, gulped down their ribald basphemy at his approach, and many a fierce brawl was nipped in the bud at the mere whisper, "The parson's coming." Professional and business men who had long since ceased to think of church as a portion of their Sunday lives, went home week after week wondering over the strength and sweetness in the young churchman's words, and doubling their contributions to the parish funds. Jim McManus, half-owner of the Alhambra, and once a terror in the town, was known to have given the lot whereon now stood the Sunday-school and chapel. It was an edifying sight to see Jim, with an enormous cluster diamond breastpin in the snowy bosom of a "boiled shirt," slinking into the rearmost pew on Thanksgiving night when the children had their song service. Perhaps no one but the rector knew how that gambler's heart was bound up in two motherless little girls who sang like cherubs at the altar, and on whose hitherto neglected heads the minister's white hands lingered as fondly as on that of the judge's only child. All the town could tell of the patience, the courage, the faith, the goodness of this young soldier's work, of the force and pathos of his pleadings. He was the man of men in the frontier community, the observed of all observers, the honored of his kind, the enthusiastic admiration of the women. Strong, spotless, pure in heart, stanch in purpose, thrice armed in the justice of his cause against all the works of darkness, rejoic-

ing in his success, humbly and earnestly grateful to the God who had granted him the victory over so many foes, ever seeking on every side some new emissary of the flesh and the devil to dare and down, he found it where last he looked for such a thing,—in the angelic face that gazed up at him with swimming eyes Sunday after Sunday from beneath that widow's cap.

His wife had called and was fascinated. "She is so lovely in her bereavement," said the little lady, who as yet knew naught of the blissful particulars of that inner life at the depot, "and the tears stood in her eyes when she told me how your sermon last Sunday had helped her." The rector's wife called twice again before he himself had time to go, and she was simply daft in her enthusiasm for this new-found friend before ever he knew her at all. Then it transpired that her sorrows, the sad trials of her life, had conspired to undermine the childlike faith that had once been hers. She wanted to believe,—ah, heaven! she longed to believe there was balm in Gilead, there was indeed a pitying, loving Saviour in whom peace and rest might be found forever. She needed so much,—so much a strong soul to lean on, a guide to follow, a teacher to inspire. All that had been denied her in the unhappy past of which she so shrank from speaking. For a fortnight the rector and his wife were equally fervently interested in the work of snatching this fair brand from the burning; then as his augmented, the lady's ardor began to cool, and in December, Mr. Hughes found, most unaccountably, that he was going it alone. Yes, Mrs. Hughes admitted she had

urged him to devote some time and attention to her new and fascinating friend. But, she concluded with feminine inconsequence, she never meant that he should devote all. Hughes well knew by this time that it was to her and for her, this fair widow, that he was preaching every Sunday, and that never for an instant did that sweet, serious face falter in its absorbed upward gaze, even when the lovely eyes, as was sometimes the case, became humid with tears. But he never realized the extent of his danger until there came a Sunday in December when her place was vacant. Neither she nor Mrs. Morris came to church, and, to his dismay, the rector found his thoughts wandered from the beauty of the sacred service and fluttered, on the wings of heaven knows what sentimental fancy, to her wherever she might be, and far away,—far away from the God whom he adored.

There were already many stanch adherents of the young rector out at the fort. He had begun his ministrations in the early summer after the battalion had gone to the Big Horn, and when the post was comparatively deserted; but he was in the heyday of his prime and popularity on their return, and presently it got to be the thing for many of the officers and most of the ladies to go in every Sunday to attend service at St. Paul's. Men and women, they too felt the power of his discourse and recognized the depth of his faith and hope and charity. The Athertons became deeply interested in the church work, the Heaths and Raymonds were devoted members of the fold, Mrs. Turner was piety personified when it became cold enough to wear her sealskin cloak,—the only one in garrison,

though a sacque or two could sometimes be seen That cloak had cost Turner many a sleepless night and all his Arizona savings. The Waldrons never missed a Sunday when it did not storm, and every one became devoted to Mr. Hughes, fond of Mrs. Hughes, and duly and properly scandalized when it dawned upon all church-going Russell that Mrs. Granger, bereft of the husband and lovers she once owned in the army, was now setting her widow's cap to fascinate this brave and gifted soldier of the church militant,—and he a married man. It was then that the ladies thought it time to tell Mrs. Hughes the widow's story, and Mrs. Hughes lost no time in transmitting it to her lord; but it was all unavailing,—Mrs. Granger had told her story herself, and a far more pathetic and touching recital it was than that with which her enemies would have compassed her round about while her friends and lovers stood afar off. Mr. Hughes knew there must be a mistake. She had been thoughtless, unsuspecting, betrayed by injudicious friends, perhaps, but designing? Oh, no, no! that were impossible.

Mrs. Morris came to Sunday-school that afternoon, and then the rector learned the cause of Mrs. Granger's absence from divine service that lovely, bracing wintry morn. She was seriously ill and unnerved. A most distressing thing had happened the previous evening. Mr. Morris and herself had gone to attend a little sociable in the neighborhood and Mrs. Granger had remained at home, protesting that she would be anything but lonely. She expected visitors from the fort, she said, and here the rector reddened with the con-

sciousness that no visitors came from the fort or elsewhere during the half-hour he had spent at her side until compelled to go about other matters. Just before ten o'clock, and after he had gone, there came a ring at the bell, and the servant admitted a tall gentleman, she said, in a military overcoat, who decided that he would not send his card up. "Tell Mrs. Granger an old friend is in the parlor," were his directions, and Mrs. Granger had presently descended, full of pleasant anticipation, no doubt, and there found, she said, an entire stranger, who gravely told her that he brought a letter of introduction, and, with an insolent smile, handed her an abusive and outrageous letter from a bitter enemy of her husband. It was a demand for money, a large sum, and coupled with threats that she would be brought to ruin if it were not paid. She ordered the man to leave the house, and he laughed at her. She called for help, and the maid-servant was afraid to go. She strove to run to the front door to call, but he interposed and fairly dragged her back into the parlor. Then she had fainted from fright and distress, and when she came to, the terrified servant was with her and the man and letter gone. Such was Mrs. Morris's recital.

Hughes went around with Mrs. Morris to see her after Sunday-school, and Mrs. Hughes, with compressed lips, walked home alone. Mrs. Granger was reclining on the lounge in her own room, lovely in her dainty wrapper and in the pathetic pallor of her face.

"It is so, so good of you to come to me, my friend," she murmured, extending to him the soft white hand.

Mrs. Granger's way of holding forth her hand to the men whom she was desirous of fascinating or whom she had already enmeshed was something suggestive. It so differed from the way in which it was extended to a woman. She stretched forth her arm to its full length, the white hand drooping from the slender wrist, yet uplifted high, for all the world as though to say "Take me to your lips." But Hughes read no such invitation. His warning had come as he stood in the face of God and his congregation that very day. He had come only to comfort and advise. His face was well-nigh as white as her's, for he had been looking squarely at his sin. He had come to get a complete description of her visitor, that he might set the detectives on his track. But her account of him and that given by the servant were decidedly conflicting. What was more, she upbraided Mrs. Morris for speaking of it. She begged that Mr. Hughes should take no steps. She refused to send for and consult her lawyer. She had been frightened; she was nervous and unstrung, she said; but the rascal was gone, gone far away she felt sure, baffled in his hopes of extracting money, and would probably never trouble her again. A day or two would make her perfectly well, she said, smiling up into his eyes with sweet, sweet sadness and again holding forth her hand. "But please, please say no more, say nothing about it; I wish to forget it utterly."

Yet late that Sunday night the lamps burned in her room, as watchful eyes could see, and the very next day Lieutenant Hollis, with trembling fingers and a strange, puzzled look in his face, received a letter by

mail. He knew the superscription at once. It was brief, but it stirred him to his very soul.

"If ever I needed your strong arm I need it now. Distress, even danger, is about me on every side. In all this world I have no one to turn to but you. Come to me for God's sake!

"MADELEINE G."

CHAPTER XXV.

EVENTS came crowding thickly as the holidays drew nigh. Mrs. Granger was looking paler than before and more pathetic. "She had much to worry her," explained Mrs. Morris, whose sympathy was voluble. "She has been utterly misjudged and wronged. People at the fort were bad enough, but we expected it of them where the women were all jealous of her; but I never thought that *my* friends here in town would be so ready to turn upon her, as it seems they are. What has she done? Was there anything strange in that a man so intellectual and grand as Mr. Hughes should be glad of frequent opportunity to meet and commune with a woman so gifted as Mrs. Granger? Was it strange that she, a woman who has been through such suffering and sorrow, whose faith was ebbing away, should eagerly grasp the outstretched hand of a man so inspired as our new rector? Was it not only natural, but perfectly right and proper, that she should welcome the frequent visits of her spiritual pastor and master? Would anything have been thought of it had not Mrs. Hughes been so young, so foolish, so jealous; and had not designing women, who wanted to stir up trouble, gone to her with cruel stories and wormed her own confidences out of her and made false deductions from what she said, and spread abroad scandalous reports

she never for an instant would have authorized?" The fact that Mr. Hughes had visited Mrs. Granger and administered spiritual consolation on three or four occasions when Mrs. Hughes believed him to be paying parochial calls on parties far less attractive, and that she learned the truth from other lips than those of her husband, had led to a storm of tears and reproaches on the little woman's part; and, though he gravely and gently reproved her and told her that she wronged him by her suspicion, the rector could not improve her opinion of Mrs. Granger, and could not justify the concealment to himself. It was true that he had been to see the other parties, and had only spent a few moments in serious but semi-confidential talk with the fairest lamb of his flock,—a lamb who was quite as old as he, but had by no means ceased to skip. It was true that of late he had been too absorbed and occupied to tell his wife of all his troubles and doings and visits in the glad, buoyant way in which he had begun during the earlier days of their married life. She was only a sweet-natured, simple-hearted, pure-minded girl who loved him devotedly and utterly, and wanted to be loved as absorbingly, even though she was not his intellectual equal by any means. It was true that he shrank from telling her of his visits to Mrs. Granger, because she was unreasonably and absurdly jealous of her and most unjustly suspicious of his motives. It was enough for him that he was pure of purpose, and that the fatherless and the widow, in one person, stood sorely in need of his ministrations. But now the matter had assumed proportions which were becoming alarming.

"Everybody is talking about it," sobbed Mrs. Hughes, with pathetic and perhaps pardonable exaggeration. "She makes trouble everywhere she goes and always in this way. You're a man whom everybody wants to know,—everybody admires and respects and looks up to, and she just craves your attention because it flatters her vanity and makes people talk and makes other people envious of her. I d-d-don't believe a word about her needing your advice a-a-and help and prayers at all; that's only her way of luring you on and making people see you are d-d-d-devoted to her."

In vain Hughes chided, soothed, pointed out to her how uncharitable it all was. Mrs. Hughes was not particularly brilliant, as had been said of her, but she was determined, and, whatsoever the men might think, it is to be feared that most of the women were so prejudiced as to side with the minister's bonny little wife against the major's beautiful widow. Many were already giving the latter the cold shoulder, and Mrs. Morris was not difficult as a means of filtering information. Mrs. Granger soon heard all about it. Needless to say she suspected it before.

"I think, if you won't mind, dear Mr. Hughes, that I will retire from the Christmas-tree committee," she said to him that night, with downcast eyes. "Straws show which way the wind blows, and all sorts of little straws have blown my way lately. It—it isn't that I lack interest; but I cannot consent to be in any one's way. I will not involve you, who have been so kind when most I needed kindness, in perplexity or trouble. Don't ask me to tell you what I know," she said, looking up with the sweet, sad smile,—that tearful smile

that so distracted the souls of men,—"but I know I am right. I know it will be for the best."

"Mrs. Granger!" he burst in, with unusual impetuosity, "indeed I cannot consent——" But she held forth her lily-white hands—both hands—and checked him.

"No, no, dear friend. Let us not blame nor censure nor bring further trouble. I am not angry. I think perhaps had I been reared as most of these that I too should have been narrow and easily moved to think ill of my kind. I feel no rancor whatever, despite the hard things some—some women have said who knew me, I once fondly hoped, far better."

"Who have spoken ill of you? Of what have they accused you?" he demanded.

"Hush!" She raised her finger with a half-playful gesture as though with that tapering digit she would close his lips. "Hush! Let us say no more. Some day, perhaps, when I come again they will think more kindly of me. It is a beautiful world after all, for you have taught me where to look for strength and comfort. I am glad if only for a time to have met and known you."

"Only for a time? Why, Mrs. Granger, you speak as though you meant to go away at once, and I thought you would stay until all this sad business of yours was settled."

Again the sweet, sad smile.

"Ah, my friend, it is not I who will go,—I *have* to stay,—but it is you who will feel compelled to discontinue these—these prized visits. Mr. Hughes, tell me truly, has not your wife upbraided you?"

"My wife is young and little experienced in the ways

of the world, and she has been annoyed by injudicious talk."

"Ah, I know, I know, and I had so hoped to keep her friendship,—she interested me so very much,—but I can see; I can see how we have been misjudged. It is hard to have to give up what is so much to me, but, dear friend—you are my friend?—you will be whatever happens?"

"How can you ask? Always, always, Mrs. Granger," he sturdily answered, as again the white hands were extended to him, the fair head drooped pathetically on that heaving bosom, and then, luckily perhaps, Mrs. Morris came bustling down the stairs, saying tea was ready and that Mr. Hughes really must stay. But the minister was in no mood for muffins. He was glad to take his hat and go.

The Christmas-tree committee was divided against itself, and almost sure to fall. Mrs. Granger's withdrawal was announced with unnecessary emphasis by Mrs. Morris, who plainly intimated that "some people had been making remarks," which remark itself brought on a general engagement. Mrs. Hughes went home aghast. Here was something she had not contemplated and knew not how to announce to her husband; but tell him she had to, and matters were not mended by his grave reply that he had feared that the unkind and undeserved remarks at Mrs. Granger's expense would precipitate just such a catastrophe. Ah me! how many generals have we who could pick to pieces another man's plan of campaign, yet never succeed with one of their own! How many doctors have we who are potent in every malady but those

which are personal! How many of our clergy are ministers of grace indeed, spreading abroad the gospel of peace with effort unflagging, but saving no leaf for home consumption! How many a man can regulate the affairs of state, of commerce, of the world at large,—anything, but the tongue of his wife! Mrs. Hughes was sure she could have said nothing at all at which Mrs. Granger should take offence. She even proposed putting on her bonnet then and there and going around and telling Mrs. Granger just what she had said, and, believing it to be the speediest way to end the war, the rector opposed no objection. Mrs. Hughes pluckily went, but the interview never took place. Mrs. Granger received her instantly, even sweetly, and presented a tall young officer whom Mrs. Hughes had occasionally seen at the fort or on horseback in the streets, a man whose name she perfectly well knew, but had least expected to encounter there,—Mr. Hollis.

Two or three people had already commented on the fact that this young gentleman had suddenly renewed his visits to the lady whom for months he had seemed entirely to shun, and there were evidences of preoccupation in his manner and of agitation in hers at this very moment. Mrs. Hughes was pleasantly welcomed, though constrainedly, by Mrs. Morris. Then who should arrive but Mr. Leavitt, Lawyer Leavitt, as they termed him locally, and the lawyer and the soldier shook hands somewhat grimly, she thought, and then she found there was a consultation of some kind going on, and, without a word upon the subject to Mrs. Morris, the rector's wife made her adieux. That ended the effort.

Meantime there had been what Mr. Wilkins pronounced the "quarest" row they ever had at the fort. It was principally remarkable, or, as Wilkins called it, "quare," because of the fact that Mrs. Wilkins was not in it. She had the facts at her fingers' ends, however, and, somewhat in the inverse order of their occurrence, they were simply these.

Colonel Atherton said that the girls Mina and Annie must leave the garrison forthwith. They were given half a day in which to pack up and go. Captain Turner had had the wool pulled over his eyes for the fiftieth time by his pretty wife, and Mina had been given a harbor under his roof at the intercession of Mrs. Turner after she had been summarily discharged by the Heaths. Mrs. Heath was a woman who hated gossip as much as Mrs. Turner seemed to love it. She traced a new story about Mrs. Granger and Mr. Hollis back through Mrs. Gregg to Mrs. Turner (who protested she had never believed a word of it, and never would have mentioned it for the world if she had known it would have been repeated), and, through Mrs. Turner to her own back door, as Mrs. Heath already suspected, and there to Mina. In ten minutes Mina was weeping in Mrs. Turner's kitchen and telling there her woful story of injustice and wrong. She had been discharged forthwith. Mrs. Turner considered Mrs. Heath's action a reflection on her own conduct. She had one servant and really needed no more; but that evening she convinced Turner that household work was breaking her down. He promptly offered to go in town and advertise for additional help. Then Mrs. Turner said she wanted Mina, a smart,

capable girl, of whom Mrs. Heath had spoken in very high terms, but Mina had determined a month ago that she could not get along with Mrs. Heath. Mrs. Heath was very exacting and the children a great care. Mina never could get along with children. Turner told his wife that if Mrs. Heath were entirely willing to let the girl go he would not interpose objection. "Only," said he, dubiously, "she used to talk so much."

"Oh, Mrs. Heath's perfectly willing," interrupted Mrs. Turner. "What she wants in a girl is entirely different from what I want." And even in making it Mrs. Turner little realized the truth of that statement. But Mina was no sooner lodged under the new roof than she exulted in her triumph and boasted herself accordingly. Both Mr. and Mrs. Heath thought it utterly improper that a girl discharged by them for being the inventor of scandalous stories should be at once taken up by another family; but they said nothing on the subject. Accidentally, however, the ladies met and a spirited controversy occurred, though Mrs. Heath kept her tongue and temper under excellent control. Wilkins got hold of the matter in some way—the usual way, presumably—just as Hollis came back from town, flushed and excited from a visit, the object of which he mentioned to no one,—the visit made in compliance with her note; and Wilkins told Hollis, "just to devil him" as he expressed it, of the story afloat, and of Mrs. Turner's having harbored the girl whom the Heaths had so promptly discharged. Hollis was full of wrath and perturbation. He went at once to the colonel with the whole story. The colonel ques

tioned Turner and Heath, told Turner the facts in the case, and poor Turner left the office with a face sadder, sallower, older than ever, to say to his wife that he knew she had deceived him again. Mrs. Turner, as was customary on such occasions, took refuge in complete prostration and bed.

But before the stage called for Mina and her trunk that young woman had unloaded the whole responsibility for the tale on her friend Annie's shoulders,—Annie, who had lived with the Grangers and knew whereof she spoke; and, so far from denying this, Annie sullenly admitted that she *had* told Mina, and with reason. She left the garrison with the other tale-bearer and some outspoken maledictions, and then went straight to Mrs. Granger when she got to town.

Two days afterwards Mr. Hollis took the Black Hills stage, a seven days' leave having been granted him on account of urgent personal business. Everybody at the post supposed he had taken the east-bound train. Even the colonel was amazed when old "Black Bill," coming down from an inspecting tour, blurted out,—

"I saw Hollis at Hat Creek. What in blazes is he doing up that way?"

But there was consternation at Russell in another day when the next news came.

"CANTONMENT ON THE PORCUPINE, December 20, 187–.

"COMMANDING OFFICER

"—TH CAVALRY, FORT RUSSELL:

"Lieutenant Hollis shot by desperadoes at Custer City. Have captured deserter Howell.

(Signed) "BUXTON."

As a result of further interchange of telegrams, Colonel Atherton decided that his assistant surgeon could be spared to go up at once. Blake wired Billings that Hollis's condition was alarming, and that the contract doctor with them was nervous. He was a very young practitioner, and this was his first experience with gunshot wounds, proof positive that he had lived but little of his life on the frontier. Authority was quickly obtained to send Doctor Grimes to the scene, and Grimes wired to town to secure a seat in the Black Hills stage. In three hours he was away; and his surprise was indeed extreme to find among his fellow-passengers Lawyer Leavitt, Mrs. Granger, and the recently-discharged servant, Annie.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THERE had been a week of clear, cold weather, following upon the heels of a snow-fall that had mantled the broad valley of the South Cheyenne in glistening white. Far over to the north and west, where lay the Black Hills of Dakota, only the gloomy forests of pine, clustering thick along the hill-sides, remained to warrant the sombre name given to the range by savage warriors many a generation before. All the valleys were deeply drifted, all the bleak hill-sides thickly coated; and here on the southward slope, in the sheltered rift where the Porcupine gurgled along under its double coat of ice and snow, the log huts of the cantonment were banked to their very eaves, and the Indian lodges, farther down the stream, peeped from the white coverlet with all their dirt and squalor intensified by the contrast. Cavalry horses stood in comfort under the improvised shelter of logs, brush, and pine boughs, and waxed fat and soft and lazy and more and more unfit for work so sure to come with the spring. But the Indian ponies, hardy and half-starved, lived their customary out-of-door life, and seemed just as ready for devilment of any kind as their dawdling, frowzy masters.

And here in the utter isolation of his life, shut off from companionship of almost every kind, for his

junior, Royce, had gone on leave, and Buxton, his senior, he never liked at all, Gerald Blake was serving his self-imposed sentence. Here Buxton ate, slept, growled, and swore, rarely, if ever, getting into saddle even when the weather was fine and the gray, frost-rimed, springy tuft seemed to invite horse and rider to vigorous gallop. Here, with the weekly coming of the mail for his sole diversion, the senior alternately marvelled and sneered at the fact that Blake had no complaints to make, no favors to ask except that of an occasional hunting-trip over in the Hills. Elk, bear, and black-tailed deer were to be had for the searching, and Blake, at least once a fortnight, would slip away with Hogan, his faithful henchman, and a brace of Ogallalla guides; take abundant robes, blankets, and provender along on the Indian *travois*, and spend three or four days hunting among the very valleys where, in the autumn of the previous year, full of high hope, health, and spirits, he had come to meet the regiment on its return from the campaign,—he and Tommy Hollis, who had not spoken to him, except when compelled to on duty, since their reappearance at Russell in October,—Tommy whom he now knew he had outrageously wronged.

And on whose account and in what a cause?

Blake would hunt from dawn to nightfall, clambering resolutely among those silent hills, following his crouching, cat-like guides. He would purposely wear himself out, physically, that sleep might soothe him in the long watches of the night. Yet many an hour he lay silent, suffering heaven only knows what sorrows, living over the months of that mad relapse into

the old infatuation, realizing at last how she had lured and reconquered him, knowing how false she had been, how reckless of his honor and good name, how utterly cold-blooded and selfish. The sight of the originals of those despatches which he obtained at the Denver office after that last interview with her, was all that was needed to prove to him how recreant she had been to her trust, how faithless to her promise and to him. When he sent that final note and her package of letters, he had told her in terms that were positive, even blunt, that never again, willingly, would he set eyes on her, and when she, spurred thereby to a descent upon his defences, was announced as coming at once to Cheyenne, he bethought him of Saint Anthony and "the sweet blue eyes" even the ascetic dare not encounter, and fled to the very wilds of the West, where by no possibility, thought he, could she follow him.

One starlit, silent night, when hardly a breath of air stirred the branches overhead, he lay with his moccasined feet outstretched to the camp-fire, thinking of the last night he had spent on this very spot. That was the night that he was boot-bombarded out of the camp of the —th, and had run, laughing, breathless, all fun and jollity, to the little fire where Stannard, Truscott, and Ray were still quietly chatting, and had there heard, as though in prophecy, of the order that would bring him face to face with the woman who had tricked him long years ago. He recalled all the resolutions made on the homeward march and, with bitter, bitter humiliation, how one and all had been undermined and blown into thin air. He wondered whether Hollis were now enjoying the field abandoned to his use,

basking in her smiles and becoming every day more and more entangled in the web she knew so well how to weave. He could do Tommy a genuine service now by putting him on his guard, but he knew perfectly well Tommy would not be put. Did not Ray, did not Mrs. Wilkins try to do the same by him all through the winter and spring, and had not he scouted their warnings as prejudiced and unjust, even in face of all her base betrayal of him so many years before? How he wished there were some way, however, in which Hollis's passion-blinded eyes might be opened to the real character of the woman! How he wished that there were only some way, some way in which to make amends to him for the brutal wrong he had done him so short a time ago!

And now the moon came peeping over the eastward heights and throwing the shadows of the pines, black, rigid, and unbending, upon the silvery surface of the opposite slopes. How cold and still the face of the wintry night! How pure and calm! How passionless and serene, yet how dazzling in radiance! The fever and turmoil in his breast, the gnawing pain at heart, as though shamed by the peace of all surrounding nature, seemed at last sinking into slumber. Close at hand, under the pines, the horses were drowsing. Hogan, soundest of sleepers, lay at the opposite side of the fire; beyond him the Indian guides and their shaggy dogs. It was one of these that suddenly lifted up a sulky head and began to growl. In an instant its companion was on its feet and both were snarling and alert. Blake listened for the sound of snapping twigs to account for their warning, but for a moment all was still; then,

however, came the challenge of a chorus of angry barks. The Indians huddled out of their blankets and, crouching, peered across the shining valley, then eagerly signalled to Blake. The next instant there came the muffled sound of cantering hoofs, and before Blake could rise to his feet a horseman reined up close at hand with cheery, confident hail.

"Can any of you gentlemen tell me the quickest way to Custer? I've got off the trail somehow." And there, the moonlight beaming on his genial, kindly face, sat Tommy Hollis. For an instant there was no reply. Blake was slowly finding himself; Hogan was only beginning to wake; the Indians, of course, said not a word. "I'm sorry to disturb you," went on the speaker, whose horse glanced wistfully about as though hopeful of rest and supper. "But perhaps it was your trail I followed instead of the road. Our stage was stalled down towards the Gap,—first one that tried to come through, you know, since the storm,—and I had an engagement at Custer, and hired this plug and came ahead. Knew you must be white men when I saw the tent."

By this time Blake stood erect:

"It is I, Hollis; don't you know me?"

"Blake!" was the answer, low-toned, amazed, even angry.

"Yes, Blake. The last man you expected to see, perhaps. Certainly, I never thought to see you; yet it is of you I have been thinking for an hour past. Dismount, won't you?"

"No," answered Hollis, with cold constraint, as he reined back. "No, I am due at Custer now, and wish to go on ahead. You can direct me, I suppose?"

"Yes; but, Hollis, it's a good ten miles from here, the trail is deep in snow, and I want to speak with you more than any man I know."

"I think I know what you wish to say," was the cold reply, "and I may as well tell you that there's no man I care less to speak to at all."

"For heaven's sake, Hollis, don't let us both be fools! I was, and I wronged you brutally; but in sackcloth and ashes have I mourned it ever since. Don't deny me the right to make amends."

"It isn't that," said Hollis, slowly. "If that were all I would have forgotten it by this time. I'm not the man to bear malice for open attack. That account was squared long ago. It is the stab in the dark—the assault one can never be prepared to meet—that I hate in any man."

"What on earth do you mean, Hollis? Of what do you accuse me? I swear I never wronged you in my life, knowingly, except in that one thing."

"You did, Blake; you wronged me in the meanest way one man can wrong another," answered Hollis, his white face twitching with emotion. "The man who intrigues against another and fills the ears of a woman with contemptible lies, teaches her to believe all manner of ill of him, and breaks off a long-standing friendship——"

"Hush!" said Blake, uplifting his hand. "Come here to one side.—Lie down, Hogan, we shan't need you.—Down, you two," he motioned to the Indians. Then, his hand on the bridle-rein, Blake turned as if to lead the horse away, but Hollis angrily jerked it loose.

"It's useless, Blake; I have heard the whole story

from her lips within the past week. You took advantage of my absence last spring to sow seeds of distrust by hints and insinuations. You found she wrote to me later, and then you began systematicallyto paint me a villain in her sight. When you foundher stanch in her friendship, then you dared to tell her I bragged of my intimacy with her and exhibited her letters——"

"Stop, man! Who told you this, and when?"

"Who? The woman you insulted at Denver. The woman you strove to ruin because she refused to marry you. The woman whom you estranged from me until this last week, by God! when she gave me all the details of your infernal——"

"That's enough, Hollis. Go no further. Do you mean that Mrs. Granger told you this of me? Do you mean that you believe it?"

"Believe it? She has yet, and offered to show me when I was fool enough to doubt at first—the very words in which you sneered at me. But for dragging her name into misery, by God! you or I would have to quit this regiment or this world. Stand aside and let me go!"

White, almost, as the snow at his feet, Blake stood there silently looking up into the furious face of the younger man who had lashed himself into this torrent of passion. For an instant he did not speak, then, as an impatient gesture warned him Hollis meant to break away, he stepped quickly to his side.

"Listen to me, man!" he said. "As God is my judge, and as I stand here at your side, I say to you that never have I spoken, never have I written one word to blacken your name in her sight. I tell you

solemnly, Hollis, she is tricking you as she has twice utterly played false to me."

But Hollis would hear no more. A fierce cry to his horse, a savage dig with the spur, and he had whirled about and gone lunging back along the trail, the way he came, braving the solitude, the wintry wastes, the snow-shrouded trails of the desolate hills, rather than stay one instant longer and hear her name defiled, her word derided.

"Follow the lieutenant," said Blake to Hogan, as soon as he could recover himself. "Start him on the Custer trail,—he cannot miss it in this moonlight; and then come back."

But there was no more sleep for Blake that night. It was barely eight o'clock when Hollis rode madly away. It was barely dawn when the furious barking of the dogs announced the sudden coming of a stranger, a stalwart frontiersman, who rode straight to the fire.

"Lieutenant Blake here?" he said. "Your friend, Lieutenant Hollis, had a shooting-match with Dick Brooks at the stage-house a few hours ago, and I'm going for the doctor over at the cantonment. He told me you were here. I reckon he's a goner, but he's a plucky one. Brooks's winged."

Three hours more and Blake was bending over the rude bed on which lay his visitor of the previous night, while a sheriff's officer stood guard, with Hogan in reserve, at the hut where Mr. Brooks was submitting to the dressing of his wounds, never knowing that he had been recognized at once as the deserter and escaped prisoner, Howell.

There were but few witnesses who could throw the faintest light upon the affray. The proprietor of the rude hotel at the stage station knew neither party, and could only say that the man called Brooks had come down from the direction of Rapid City the day previous, accompanied by another stranger. They had stabled their horses and strolled about the place; that Brooks was annoyed when told that there was little or no chance of the stage coming up from the south on account of the heavy drifts, and had fidgeted about the premises until quite late at night, and then had gone reluctantly to the room assigned him, while his companion wandered over to the "faro layout" across the street.

"Just about eleven o'clock this other gentleman," said the host, "rode in from the south and put up his horse; he said he had had a hard time getting across the range, and immediately inquired if any one was waiting for him,—a man named Baker,—and just then this man Brooks came in from the room he had at the back of the house, and the two stood and looked at each other a moment without saying a word; then the new-comer spoke slowly: 'I'm looking for a man named Baker, but it seems to me I've seen you somewhere before.' 'You've never seen me that I know of,' said Brooks, who is a thick-set fellow with a sandy beard, 'and I don't know who you are; but I was to meet a gentleman from Cheyenne. Your name is——?' 'My name is Hollis. Suppose we step outside into the moonlight where we can talk quietly.' And so they had gone. It didn't seem more than five minutes," said the landlord, "before the pistols began to crack." He

peeped out to see who was shooting this time, and there were the two strangers, the tall young fellow following up the burly one, who was dodging and firing and falling back. The men came tumbling out from the faro game when they heard the shots, and just then the heavy man, Brooks, stumbled over something and fell full length, and his pistol was hurled away, and what does the young fellow do but throw away his too, and then make a spring and grab the fallen one at the throat. Just then the man that came in with Brooks ran across the street, put his pistol close to the young gentleman's side and fired. "Shot him from behind, by God!" said the landlord, "and that was the end of it. We lifted him up and carried him in here, and some of the boys led Brooks, or Baker, whatever his name is, away, and the next I knew some one came and said the fellow who shot the lieutenant had gone away—saddled his horse and skipped. Mr. Hollis was himself long enough to tell us who he was and where to send for the surgeon and where to find you," said he, addressing Blake. "And the boys they just made up their minds Brooks shouldn't leave, though he tried to go as soon as he heard the soldiers were coming."

Such was the proprietor's story to Blake, who, in sore distress, returned to the bedside, where Hollis lay moaning and unconscious.

Already the fever seemed setting in. Another messenger was sent on the trail of the first with a note to Buxton, giving in brief these details, and stating that Hogan had recognized in Brooks the man Howell who broke jail at Russell, where he had been arrested as a

deserter. Buxton, as has been seen, lost no time in wiring the news, but it was late at night before the young doctor reached the scene, and by that time Hollis had been some twenty-four hours with only such surgery as Blake and the Black Hillers could devise. After all, they were not more distressed and worried than was the professional. The wound had been bandaged and the flow of blood checked before even Blake arrived, and in the feverish state of the patient the doctor dare not attempt to probe for the bullet. He eagerly assented to Blake's suggestion that they telegraph to Laramie or Russell for a surgeon. A sergeant and four men had come with orders to arrest Howell and convey him to the cantonment, but by this time Howell was himself very weak from loss of blood, for Hollis had shot him through the right arm and thigh, and in a condition of physical and mental excitement that alarmed the doctor and led to his declaring it might be death to the prisoner to move him at all. By this time, too, he knew that he was under guard, and had begged to see Lieutenant Blake; but Blake would not leave the bedside of his comrade. Then Brooks dictated a dispatch to be sent to Cheyenne, and it went almost as soon as that from Buxton, which had to be carried a score of miles by courier before reaching a telegraph station.

It was to Mrs. Granger, care of Banker Morris, Cheyenne.

"Betrayed and shot by your agent. Money needed at Custer instantly, or the truth will out. Send Annie with it.

"Signed, R. BROOKS."

Even as Mrs. Granger, with staring eyes, was reading this despatch, in came, breathless, Mrs. Morris with the news that Tommy Hollis had been shot dead by desperadoes in the Hills. The effect of the double announcement was immediate. She gasped, stared wildly at her friend an instant, clutched at the empty air and fainted away. Revived by Mrs. Morris's skillful ministrations, she had been assisted to her room, whither in ten minutes Leavitt was summoned to her presence; and then, amid tears and ejaculations and tragic wringing of hands and parading up and down the floor, she confided to him a story that he never even faintly suspected before, and that made his gloomy face grow black. Like almost every other man who had come under the influence of his client's fascinations, the lawyer had begun to feel a sentimental interest in the lovely widow. It was too late, perhaps, to save her from the consequences of so important a concealment from her professional adviser; but, as he left the house to make his hurried preparations, he devoutly thanked heaven it was not too late to save himself.

"There is but one thing to do," he had gravely, even sternly, told her: "we must reach him before—before he is gone. Where can that girl Annie be found?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

"You have but a few hours to live, Brooks; the doctors bid me tell you so. It is useless for you to hope. Tell the truth now. You have sworn all along that your sister was still alive. Where is she?"

It was Leavitt who spoke, and the cold, measured words fell like a sentence upon the wretch who lay clutching at the bed-clothes and glaring at the solemn faces grouped about him. The sheriff stood at the door-way; Doctor Grimes was at the foot of the bed, closely scanning the patient's twitching face; the girl Annie, a comely young woman, was kneeling and holding the fevered head upon her arm, glancing nervously around from face to face, her eyes red and swollen from excessive weeping.

Brooks turned piteously to Grimes. For three days the wounded man had furiously raged at any one who suggested the faintest possibility of a fatal termination to the case. All along, since the high fever first asserted itself, the younger physician had seemed grave and anxious; and when Grimes arrived and could spare a little time from his proper patient, the condition of Brooks was almost definitely settled,—both doctors feared blood-poisoning. Annie had been admitted to the room immediately upon her arrival, and had thrown herself weeping upon her knees, clasping

the stricken man's hand in her own and calling him husband. They would not take her away; indeed, Brooks seemed somewhat soothed by her presence, though at first he peevishly rebuked her tears and stoutly assured her he would soon be up and well. Leavitt was later accorded a private interview with him, which left the patient more fretful and feverish, even furious with anger. Loudly he maintained that all he had told Mrs. Granger was true and she knew it, and Mrs. Granger was too much prostrated by the fatigue of her long journey by stage to approach him at all, unless, perchance, he had a different story to tell.

When warned that he was disbelieved, and when it was first intimated to him that he might not recover, he called them liars and robbers; he refused to believe there was danger; refused to modify his statement in the least. The terrible whip he had held over the head of Granger for years had only been partially conjectured, and now, as revealed to Leavitt after vigorous cross-questioning of Mrs. Granger, of Brooks and Annie, was practically as follows: Years before, while stationed in the South, Granger had married the sister of this very clerk; it was a secret marriage; it was not entirely a voluntary affair on Granger's part; it was followed by strife and misery and sin. She remained there a pensioner when he came away, and there Granger's spies were left to watch her. As the price of his own silence, Brooks demanded and got through Granger's influence a clerkship, which soon took him North. While he was away ample proof was furnished the major of the infidelity of the woman

who was entitled to bear his name; but before he could cast her off through the courts she had vanished from the scene, and the next thing that came was the well-authenticated report of her death. Few people knew anything of the marriage. Her sudden demise had brought him release without the scandal and publicity of legal proceedings, and now, doubly-freed, Granger soon met and eagerly paid his court to Madeleine Torrance, and almost the first man he encountered on his transfer to the West was this same clerk, destitute and dissipated, but armed with letters proving Mrs. Granger the first to be still alive,—her own letters written within the month.

Granger was simply appalled. He loved after his fashion the beautiful woman whom he had so proudly introduced as his wife; he rejoiced in the attention she received, even though he soon grew madly jealous of more than one of her admirers. By this time he had learned all the old story of her engagement to Blake, though she had laughed it off as a school-girl affair. But, in some way, she had gradually become acquainted with many of the rumors with regard to his past life, both personal and official. What maddened him was the consciousness that she not only cared nothing for him, but had openly told him that she held him in contempt. The story of their occasional quarrels and of his having struck her were founded on fact, though only on one occasion had he ever been goaded into a blow. Brooks demanded for himself employment at the depot, and for his sister the payment through him of a certain sum of money every month. She had run away from New Orleans with her lover when con-

vinced that her crime was known, and Brooks assured the major she had lived with that party several years until his sudden death left her penniless. She had eagerly lent herself to the plan of deceiving her husband by the story of her death. She really loved the young Southerner who had tempted her away; indeed, she had been on the point of marrying him at the outbreak of the Rebellion, when a lover's quarrel interposed, and in a huff he enlisted in the Tigers and went with Dick Taylor's brigade to the Shenandoah Valley. After the occupation of New Orleans by the Union forces, she and her mother were left without means or protection. Brooks, the brother, was in the Confederate service as a junior officer, but was captured at Fort St. Philip, and, being smart and unscrupulous, gave his parole not to serve again with the gray battalions, where he had every chance of being killed, but in a more practical way he took up arms against the United States as an understrapper in the great supply depot in New Orleans, where a man of his knowledge and address could find abundant opportunity of despoiling the Egyptians. The sister was then in the heyday of her attractions, dark, vivacious, wild as a hawk, and perfectly willing to accept the attentions Granger and others lavished upon her, since they were accompanied by reckless expenditure of money at her capricious will. All through the war the major was stationed in the Crescent City, was married to her late in '64, six months before the surrender at Appomattox, and not long before the return of the lover of her girlhood days. The latter would have scorned and avoided her, but this was a case where not man, but

woman, proposed. She and Granger had quarrelled from the start. He had lavished money on her when she was free to choose, but denied it now that she was bound. When summoned North he left her to her own devices, and was in nowise surprised at her defection. He thanked God as piously as he knew how when he heard she was dead, and now he was aghast, for Brooks coolly told him she would indeed have left him unmolested forever if her lover had lived; but after several blissful years in Texas the ex-Confederate captain had suddenly died, leaving her with three children, but otherwise destitute. "She empowers me to say that her silence can be bought," said Brooks to Granger, and named the terms.

And with this mill-stone about his neck, Granger lived his first year at the depot, while Brooks was behaving so outrageously that the major's name was constantly being involved. Every "rounder" in Cheyenne knew that month after month Brooks was spending much more than double his pay. It became evident that he was not only embezzling the money paid for his sister, but that he had still other sources of supply. Granger had already detected him in selling forage and other property to freighting and cattle "outfits." At last, after a violent quarrel with Mrs. Granger, and nerved to desperation, the major had summarily discharged the fellow and dared him to do his worst, simply assuring him that he would kill him if he showed his face around the depot again, and then blow his own brains out if he found that the scoundrel had betrayed him. As this latter course would effectually cut off his main source of revenue, Brooks was indeed

alarmed. He implored his brother-in-law not to punish him, and then offered for a large sum in cash to surrender his sister's letters; Granger refused, shrewdly asking what was the use, since Brooks could easily supply himself with others just like those already exhibited.

Meantime the girl Annie had come to live at the depot in the Grangers' household. She was young, good-looking, giddy, and Brooks saw that she might be made very useful. He made love to her; had secret meetings with her in the dark shadows of the great deserted buildings after her evening work was done. She was soon completely fascinated, despite the fact that Grimsby, the Englishman, had been paying her quite devoted attention and had offered marriage. Annie was a born gossip and chatter-box, but no fool. Brooks actually became enamored of her comely face and form; but not until a civil magistrate had sealed the compact would she be further deluded. Then, though he soon began to neglect and ill-treat her, she was loyally obedient to his every wish, except perhaps when chatting with her half-sister Mina, when the passion for gossip and the possession of startling and sensational topics overcame her sense of duty; but even from Mina she concealed the fact of her alliance with Brooks.

Finding, at last, that he had gone too far; that Granger, maddened, hounded, bled, blackmailed, was now so desperate that at any moment he might indeed precipitate a catastrophe, expose him as a thief and forger—which he readily could do—and possibly blow his own brains out, Brooks played his last card.

Granger dared him to produce his sister, and refused to furnish more money until he did. It was useless to attempt to bleed him further, but—there was Mrs. Granger. He began by anonymous letters, which Annie left where her mistress must find them. Then he ventured to the depot one night when he knew Granger to be in town, and the moment her visitors had departed demanded audience, and boldly told her that she must secure his restoration to his position as clerk and her husband's assurance that he should not be prosecuted, or she was a ruined woman. Mrs. Granger was both angered and agitated at first, but speedily grew calm, and even interested, when it appeared that it was not her honor he threatened to undermine, but her husband's. He told of the proofs he had of the major's peculations in the South. She treated him with cool contempt: "All that was investigated, sir, and he was acquitted." At last, furious at her calm and his own failure, Brooks burst forth with the announcement that she was not even Granger's wife. Here, too, he failed. She was now calm, cold, and contemptuous. He referred possibly to the fact that Major Granger had had some absurd connection with some obscure woman in New Orleans during the war days; she knew all about that. "The woman was my sister," was the next announcement of Brooks, "and I witnessed the marriage, as did others who are still alive." But even now Mrs. Granger did not wince.

"That is of no especial importance," said she; "this-er—lady died long years ago."

"Your husband lied to you," said Brooks. "He knew all along she was alive; to this very day she is

his pensioner, he her sole support." Then indeed Mrs. Granger had gasped and clutched her chair.

"That is false, every word of it," was her answer.

"It is true, every syllable," was his. "Here are letters from her, written this very year. In ten days, yes, in six, I can produce her in Cheyenne, and with his child."

Then of a sudden the major's voice was heard without. Brooks stripped three letters from a package he took from his pocket: "Read these," he said. "I will be here to-morrow night for your answer."

But before the morrow night came there was a gambling row in town, and Brooks, ex-clerk, was borne away by his friends to the Cache la Poudre, while a coroner's jury sat on the other party to the row, and this time brought in a square verdict. The victim was a popular gambler; the victor, the aggressor in the fight, was regarded with deep disfavor. Having lost his position under the government, he was not now a useful member of society. Fuel and forage and other such things no longer were attainable at rates far below the market quotations. The jury found the deceased came to his death at the hands of Brooks, and a warrant was issued for his arrest.

"I was shot then twice as bad as I am this time," raved Brooks, as he told of this episode, "and I got well in a few weeks, just as I'll get well now; only, damn those soldiers who swore I was a deserter. I wasn't. I did go to the Pacific coast and wrote to Granger from there, and he sent me money for nearly a year provided I'd stay away; but I was fool enough to go back. I heard that fellow Grimsby was making up

to Annie again, and I went and I got there to the depot that night it blew so horribly, and, sure enough, there was Grimsby sitting in the kitchen with her and making eyes at her until I was mad enough to shoot him. I watched until he came out, then tackled him at the barn and nearly choked him to death before he could beg. Then he swore that he thought I was dead; that he meant honestly by her; that Mrs. Granger had brought other servants from the East and tried to get rid of Annie, but that he had induced Mrs. Granger to take Annie back, but that Annie must have known all along I was alive and she had played me false. There was a gentleman at the fort had taken a fancy to her, Grimsby said, a tall, fine-looking fellow, a Lieutenant Hollis, and he made her presents and came to see her evenings when Granger or his wife and Martha, the other girl, were away; she let him know when she'd be alone."

Brooks knew the lieutenant by sight, since Hollis came to the fort not long before the latter had to leave, and Hollis did not know Brooks at all; and just then, while Grimsby was talking to him, a horse neighed at the gate, and the Englishman said: "By God, there he is now." "I sprang up, releasing him," said Brooks; "and there, sure enough, in the dim light of the lamps, I could see a tall officer hurrying through the gate. He came round to the side, looked in at the kitchen window, but Annie had gone up stairs; then I was sure it was her he was after. I'd been drinking, and when he turned I picked up the first thing that stood there by the carriage-shed and went for him He sprang to the front entrance and was just reaching

the bell when I struck him one blow, and then, to my horror, saw it wasn't Hollis at all. I had to skip for town at once, where some fellows I knew gave me shelter. I was afraid I might have killed him. Lieutenant Blake knows who it was. Where is he, doctor?"

"He is with Mr. Hollis," answered Grimes, glancing anxiously at the lawyer.—"Do you need more?" he asked.

"Much more. He hasn't told half; he doesn't understand he has no chance of living. He's lying yet in some things," was the low-toned answer.

Annie was sobbing again and bent over to kiss the fevered face: "You knew I couldn't be wicked when I loved you so, Dick," she moaned. "Why did you believe him?"

"Damn him! I paid him off well afterwards, even though——"

"Hush, Dick, hush," she interrupted, putting her hand on his mouth; "don't speak of that."

"Yes, let him speak," demanded Leavitt. "There is more he must tell. First, though, where is your sister now, Brooks?"

"Where you'll never find her so long as I live. I'm her agent. I've got her power of attorney. You can't make me believe I'm dying. You're leagued against me in the hope of extorting a confession; but it's truth I'm telling you. Ask her; ask the woman who calls herself Mrs. Granger if it isn't truth. She has paid me well to keep her secret, but not half enough. The jig's up now, I suppose, since she has been fool enough to tell her lawyer. She might have

enjoyed her name and her wealth the rest of her life if she hadn't been such an idiot. I only ask reasonable allowance. He was willing enough to give me fifteen hundred a year until I got into trouble there. He had me watched and threatened and then defied any revelations I might make; but the moment I put those letters in her hands he was gone. That's what made her go to the sea-shore and stay all last summer; but she was a fool there: instead of giving those letters back to me or even burning them, she kept them to taunt him with, to hold over him when he forbade her dancing or going with other men,—those young fellows out at the fort. He searched her desks and trunks and drawers,—Annie saw him, Annie knows,—trying to find those letters and others that he believed she got from Lieutenant Hollis; she never left them out of her sight until the night of that big party up there at the fort; she had them in the inner pocket of that seal-skin jacket,—Annie knew it,—and he knew they must be there. He didn't know what else he'd find, though, when he slashed through that canvas and searched her pockets. He got three letters his rightful wife had written to me; he found a long one his bogus wife had written to Lieutenant Blake,—her old lover,—and an awful row they had that night when they got home,—Annie heard it all. After that it was just hell and repeat." But here a fit of coughing choked his utterance, and Grimes signalled to the lawyer that he must talk no more.

But by nightfall the bold defiance and the mad raving were ended. Brooks at last seemed to realize that he was going fast. Doctor Grimes had been away

much of the day; two patients demanded his attention now. Annie, weeping afresh, had told her pitiful tale in response to the stern demands of the lawyer. Brooks was forever urging her to gain possession of any letters her mistress might have received either from Hollis or Blake. In the low cunning of the fellow he could never rid himself of the idea that she was carrying on a love-affair, the proofs of which, once in his hands, would enable him to blackmail her to his heart's content. He had, indeed, enlisted on the Pacific coast under the name of Howell, after a protracted spree of drink and gaming had left him destitute. He kept up his threatening letters, sending them through Sergeant Jamieson and the Einsteins in town, the firm that so sorely tempted the stable sergeants at the fort and had compassed the downfall of the ex-hussar. There was a gang of six or eight, Annie tearfully admitted; she had implored her lover to have no more to do with them, but it was useless; he was deep in the toils. She was mad with fear when Brooks reappeared one night at the depot and tapped at the window. He was always jealous of Grimsby, and half afraid of him, too, for Grimsby could not but know many of his secrets. Grimsby knew nothing of her marriage, though, and kept persecuting her with his suit, and then got to drinking because she refused him. Then he, too, began threatening Mrs. Granger, and talking about the letters that he used to carry for her to the fort; and when he was discharged, what did he do but go right to Lieutenant Blake when he was drunk, thinking to induce him to intercede to get him restored to his job, and when Blake refused he grew reckless

and impudent, and said things about him and Mrs. Granger that led to Mr. Blake's thrashing him; Grimsby told her about it. He was taken into the gang after his discharge from the Grangers' service by the Einsteins at Jamieson's request; and then Brooks came back again on being assured in town that there would be no further trouble about his shooting scrape if he could raise a thousand dollars to "fix" certain officials. She was frightened at his coming, because Granger had found out more of his crimes, and so he dare not show himself at the depot; but Annie met him in town whensoever he demanded, and there he grew reckless and began drinking again, and threatened to kill Reilly, who had been taken as driver in place of Grimsby, for it was Reilly who betrayed him to the major. He went out to the fort the night of the theatricals and attacked Reilly there, and was recognized as a deserter and imprisoned. He wrote to Granger to come at once and get him out or else he would tell everything he knew; no answer reached him. He was furious against the major when he sawed himself out that awful night, and, scudding before the gale, made his way down the valley to the shack; that was the night the major disappeared, and she never again saw Granger or Grimsby alive.

And here she was summoned to the bedside of the dying man. He was face to face at last with the dread conqueror. He was utterly broken down. So long as a vestige of hope remained he had stood firm in his denials. Now his story was gasped in short whispered sentences to their straining ears. It was a weird and villanous tale, and practically as follows;

There were five of them at the shack when he got there at midnight, for Granger had made his way thither the instant it was dark, in order to consult with Einstein and the others, with a view to establishing an alibi or something that would get Brooks out of the guard-house and enable them to start him away; but Granger never dreamed of Brooks's escape that night any more than that he himself could get back to the depot in face of that blizzard. Brooks was mad with rage and suffering when he reached the hut and found him sitting there at midnight, pleading, actually pleading, with Jamieson and Grimsby and Einstein, and Einstein was jeering at him, taunting him, showing him the letters Lieutenant Blake had dropped at the stables that spoke of others that she had written to him,—the letter that Jamieson had found and yet denied having seen. Brooks must have been mad that night,—crazy, in fact; for he filled up with whiskey and joined in the taunts at Granger's expense. They had him at their mercy; he could not escape; they tortured him with their sneers and insults, but it was not until Grimsby had got recklessly, madly drunk that the tragedy came. They had united in a demand that he should sign a paper pledging himself to make certain monthly payments to each and every one of the party, and when he refused, and they assured him everything should be made public, Brooks, who saw the agony and despair on his face, fearing that they might drive him to suicide and so rob him of the perquisites he had so long undividedly enjoyed—Brooks interposed, and a new quarrel ensued between Grimsby and himself; the next thing he knew pistols were out, Granger

had fired one shot, just one, when down he went on his face; some one's bullet had done the work. The major lay there in the shack, stone dead. They had killed the goose that laid the golden egg.

Then horror had settled upon them. Brooks was crazed with fear of discovery. They dragged the body out in the course of an hour, hid it in the rapidly-filling ravine back of the hut, and swore each other to secrecy. Grimsby begged Einstein for money to get away with, but he would not give a cent. He would pay, he said, liberally for goods as before, and that meant more robbery. They decided on the magazine and Freeman's stable, and Brooks determined to raid Blake's room for letters which Annie was sure Mrs. Granger no longer had, but had given to him to secrete for her. The robbery was successsful, except that Brooks found nothing and Jamieson was caught. They knew he would not peach, but Grimsby's share of the plunder was small; his nerve was gone; he was aghast when the papers announced a large reward was to be offered for the discovery of Major Granger; he talked wildly of his fears, and then declared he could not bear the suspense any longer, he must get away; but Brooks charged him with intention of turning State's evidence; a desperate quarrel followed, a fight, and Grimsby was tossed into the swollen creek, a corpse, with a bullet through the brain.

"I swear I never fired the shot that killed Granger," moaned Brooks; "but Grimsby would have sworn I did. It was a fair fight I had with the Englishman; one or the other had to go; it was his life or mine."

And so the gang was thinned out badly, Jamieson

and the stable orderly jailed, Grimsby dead, and Granger lying there in the snow behind the shack; the others were in hiding, waiting for money from Einstein, the night after Grimsby was killed. Brooks had been nervous all day, drinking, and when the sheriff surrounded the shack that night and they slipped out he was the hindermost. Old Bryan grabbed him in the dark.

"I didn't know him from Adam that night," gasped Brooks; "but fire I had to, and that made another, but the last. They got me away somehow, and I hid in Einstein's garret nearly two weeks." And that summer he traced and followed Mrs. Granger, and she paid some money, but not what he demanded; still she held those letters of his sister's, and if anything happened to them or to her, so much of his capital was gone. Annie had told him that Blake had them; that he kept them for her, and it was Blake she loved and meant to marry. That made Brooks rob Blake's room at Berksville. "I didn't get poor Julia's letters," he said; "but I did get a package of Mrs. Granger's to him, and that gave me a new hold. I demanded more money of her, and she put him on my track instead of a lawyer. I know her now, though I didn't then. I was up near Leadville, and little by little got to drinking and gambling again, and one morning I woke up in a strange room, feeling horribly rocky. I knew I must have been dead drunk the night before, and then it flashed over me that I had been robbed; but my money was all right; the packet in my left breast-pocket was there; the packet in the right was thinned out to five letters, one of them a new note. It said,

'You got drunk last night and I took care of you, —also of a package of letters belonging to me.' Nothing else was disturbed. And then I found that Blake had been there nearly a week, watching me. It was the only way he could ever have got those letters without a fight or exposure; in either case her name was blasted. I got crazy with rage at being outwitted by that cavalry lieutenant, who, however, never dreamed what he had left behind,—my sister's letters. He never seemed to notice them, or, if he did, he couldn't have known anything about who she was. He only took the packet addressed to him in Mrs. Granger's hand. Then I followed her up to Cheyenne and threatened immediate exposure unless a big sum was paid at once, and I was recognized there by some fellows who had an old grudge against me; I had to run for the Hills, but from Deadwood I demanded instant payment; and then came a letter promising everything, and begging me to meet her agent at Custer; he would inquire for a Mr. Baker. I went, and there came this young fellow Hollis. He had no more come to pay than you have; he had come to demand the surrender of those letters from Julia. He was her dupe, poor fellow. I had no grudge against him. I warned him not to make trouble. I didn't want to hurt him; indeed, I tried to get away. I didn't kill him; it was another man who fired that awful shot; but it was Mrs. Granger, by God! it was Mrs. Granger who murdered him and me."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THAT night the wind began moaning among the pines again and whistling through the crannies and knot-holes in the flimsy old frame structure. There was gloom and silence throughout the sparse frontier settlement. One or two prospectors and stage hands loafed about the bar across the way and grimly eyed each new-comer from the direction of the little tavern, where a couple of soldiers sauntered up and down before the door and where the office lights burned dimly. From an upper window there had come, soon after nightfall, the sound of a woman's wailing, loud and desolate; a wail of grief and wrath combined, like the cry of some wild hunted animal whose young has been slain before her very eyes. A hanger-on about the office had nodded in response to the muttered question of one of the troopers as he came forth and lunged across the snow-heaped road to the red glare of the opposite bar. A tall officer, with pale, bearded face, presently stepped from the door-way, at sight of whom the blue overcoats had become statuesque, and the fur-gloved hands gone up in salute.

"You men go in and get your supper," was the quiet order. "I shall have a despatch to send to the cantonment in an hour." Then he began pacing slowly up and down in the darkness, his head bent upon his

breast, his hands clasped behind him. One of the employés of the stage company, lolling against the stable-door a few yards below, slouched up the walk and accosted him.

"That feller's gone, I suppose, lieutenant?"

Mr. Blake bowed assent, but went slowly on. As he returned, the man queried again,—

"How's the other?—the gentleman in the back room."

"The doctors say it is simply wonderful that he has held out so long."

"Ain't there no hope for the young feller? He's a good one."

Blake slowly shook his head and continued his solemn promenade. He seemed to have grown a year older in these few days of anxiety and care. The loud wailing above had given place to a moaning plaint, as though the girl had wearied of her very outcries. The door again opened and Leavitt came grimly forth, his lips compressed, his brow clouded. Blake turned sharply about and evidently sought to avoid him. The lawyer looked after the tall officer a moment; glanced upward at the hurrying, lead-colored clouds and at the snow-flakes slanting down.

"Will the stage go south to-night?" he asked the stableman, who was softly whistling. The man, with ostentatious deliberation, finished his tune, looking unconcernedly up the road.

"No reason she shouldn't that I know of."

"How soon?"

"O-oh, in about two hours."

"I want three places inside."

"Well, you'll have to ask the boss, then."

Gerald Blake had caught the last words and turned sharply about. The next moment he stepped forward and accosted the lawyer.

"Pardon me, Mr. Leavitt, does your—entire party return to-night?"

"Provided we can secure seats, and I am told there is little southward travel just now," was the calm reply. "The stage stops here to change horses, I believe, so we have time to get ready after it comes in."

"Will you excuse my inquiring, sir, whether your client knows that Lieutenant Hollis is not likely to live through the night?"

"Mrs. Granger has heard of the gentleman's precarious condition with keen sorrow. She has been constant and solicitous in her inquiries, but she is powerless to help. She is even in the way here, and you'll admit this is hardly a congenial spot for a lady to spend another night in."

"But one moment, Mr. Leavitt," and Blake's face was very pale and his lips tremulous. "My friend came here on a desperate mission in her behalf, if not actually at her request. He is sleeping under the influence of morphine now. He has been unconscious much of the day, yet he has heard she was coming, and he longs to see her. If he should recover consciousness again and ask for her, I would not like to have to tell him she had been here and had gone."

Leavitt was silent a moment. Even to the cold-blooded, pragmatical man of the law there was an appeal in Blake's words he could not face without a qualm.

"The situation is most distressing," he said, after a pause. "I am not at liberty to explain why, but, just as my client's interests demanded that we should lose no time in coming here when the tidings of this man's desperate condition reached us, so is it that her interests require her to leave now. Everything that can be accomplished by her coming is now effected,—everything that can be, that is,—and it is best she should go. If there was anything she could do, or if there is anything she could send, to alleviate the sufferings of her unfortunate young friend, doubtless she will be very glad."

"By heaven! Mr. Leavitt. It is not possible that Mrs. Granger knows how critical his condition is, and that she is going away knowing it. Has she—do you mean she has consented to go at once—this evening?"

"Certainly, Mr. Blake. She is advised by Doctor Grimes that the sooner she gets home the better. In her highly morbid and sensitive condition the sights and sounds around this wretched spot bring back all too sharply the tragedy which so recently blighted her life. She may break down any moment."

But Blake would hear no more. Turning sharply, he burst his impetuous way into the office and asked for Grimes; and Grimes had been called to the bedside of Mr. Hollis, who was moaning in delirium, the attendant said. He sought and found the other doctor, and of him he demanded if he could see Mrs. Granger at once. A look of surprise came into the physician's face.

"I'll ask presently, Blake," he said. "She is soothing and comforting that maid of hers just now,—

getting her ready for the journey. The girl was the wife of that man Brooks, as you probably know by this time. Queer how some women can mourn a fellow who has done nothing but abuse and neglect them!"

It was half an hour before the answer came. Mrs. Granger declared herself so prostrate, so agitated, that it would be impossible for her to see any one but her medical and legal advisers. Would Mr. Blake write a note? She would be glad to read anything her friends might wish to say in her distress.

And there, in that creaking shed, in that snow-swept valley among the hills of Dakota, Gerald Blake made his last formal appeal, wrote his last letter to the woman who had been the love and glory of his younger life.

"He is hovering between life and death. His life hangs on a thread, and his every word is of you, his every thought is for you. He has been buoyed up only by the wild hope of seeing you; for the doctor told him—God forgive the blunder!—you were coming. When he recovers consciousness, and I know that he will, and finds you have gone without one word, look, or touch for the man who risked his life, his good name, everything he had in the world, in your service, —it will kill him.

"GERALD BLAKE."

And this note he took to the door of her room, knocked loudly, and handed in.

An hour later there came a summons from Grimes. Hollis was rousing, had asked for him, and Blake,

who had been feverishly pacing the pathway without, hastened to the bed whereon lay the wasting form of his comrade; and the light of recognition was in poor Tommy's eyes, a feeble hand crept forth and a ghost of the old smile seemed to flicker for an instant on his face.

"Blake, old man, you've been sticking to me like a —like——" and Hollis paused. Simile was only one of his many weaknesses now.

"Like a burr—burr—burrother, Tommy, as Dundreary would say," grinned Blake, with twitching mouth, as he took the wasted hand in his warm brown palms. He winked hard to drive back the tears. He bit into his lip to still its quivering. "How goes it now, my lad? Feel more like yourself after your nap?"

"Legs, I've been dreaming, I reckon,—dreaming I heard a woman crying over me. Has she got here?"

"All dreaming, Tom. Nobody's going to do any crying over you for many a long year, if Grimes and I can help it. Think you could drink a little something?

A weary shake of the head.

"But, Blake, didn't they wire she'd get here,—or was coming here with Grimes? Surely I heard that."

"Must have dreamed it, Tommy. I don't know who could have been fool enough to tell you that." He drew one hand and hid his eyes an instant, and from this covert glared at Grimes, lurking back by the doorway where Hollis could not see him. The door creaked on its hinges. Grimes softly slipped away.

"It seems so late, Legs. When did Grimes come?"

"Oh, while you were asleep; more than four hours ago"—"God forgive me the lie!—more than twenty-four," groaned poor Blake to himself.

"But, honest—Didn't I—really—hear a woman crying? Is he all right—that man Brooks?"

"He's all right, Tommy. Don't you worry."

"I should hate to die with his death to answer for, too, Blake. But it wouldn't have been murder. You know what a scoundrel he was. She told you, didn't she?"

"Worst kind of a whelp, from all I heard, Tommy."

"He told me when I demanded those letters that he'd given them all to you at Leadville, Blake; but I knew he was lying. Think of the awful position in which she was placed. You can't blame her now, Blake, though you did at Denver; that's what made me so angry. I suppose the rest was only poking fun at me, though I took it so much to heart."

"Tommy, I never poked fun at you,—to her, at least,—in all my life. I never,—before God,—never said anything you accused me of the other day."

"Perhaps she misunderstood," was the weary reply. "She has had horrible suffering. You might have spared a woman such a blow, even if you were hurt, Legs."

"What blow, Tommy? Look here, old boy, that medicine's gone to your head. I mustn't let you talk too much; you'll get flighty again." And Blake looked wistfully to the door. His lips moved as though he would whisper "Grimes," but Grimes had stolen away.

"No, Legs, I'm clear-headed enough; only so weak. They've got him where he can't escape, have they?"

"You bet they have!"

"And the letters,—his sister's letters?"

"I never heard about them, Tom. What have they to do with it?"

"Why, yes, Blake; the letters his sister, the first Mrs. Granger, wrote,—those that threatened her."

Far up the road there came the sound of loud-cracking whip. Over the moan of the wind rose the distant rumble of wheels.

"The stage?" whispered Hollis, an eager light in his eyes.

"The stage from the north, man! But what do you mean? What first Mrs. Granger?"

"Why, his wife, the one that ran away from him in New Orleans—Brooks's sister, you know. She told you all about it—Madeleine—at Denver—when that fellow tried to make her suppose his sister would tell the truth at last. She'd been alive all those years. Madeleine told you, for she said that you answered that it was all true, and that you believed that she'd known it all along;—that she knew it when she threw you over and married Granger."

"Hollis! Are you mad?"

"Mad? no! Here's her letter to him bidding him meet me here and give me his sister's letters. It's blood-stained now. Read it. It's one thing I got from him, at least."

But Hollis never noted the staring eyes and livid face before him, as Blake strove to read those hurried lines, penned in the hand he knew and had loved so well.

Out in the passage-way the stairs began to creak. Some one was coming down. Aloft there was heard the sound of suppressed sobbing—the swish of a woman's trailing skirts. Without, the jovial sound of the driver's voice hailing the knot of loungers, the plunging hoofs of the mettlesome team, the clatter of the stage as it drew up in front of the station, the greetings of sturdy Black Hillers, one to another, as the few passengers tumbled out and went in search of creature comfort. Blake sprang to his feet.

"Hollis, dear old fellow, I know nothing of this. She never told me of any such affair. I never in the world said such things as you tell me I was accused of. You must have dreamed that, Tommy! She couldn't have said that of me!"

"She did, Legs. I believed it; but I can't now, when you deny it. Then he's got that woman's letters yet. You—you must get them, old man, for she'll be here soon, and I'm all out of the fight now."

Blake never stopped to answer. Two strides took him to the door. Two women, one heavily veiled, the other bowed and weeping, were going down the narrow stairway, Leavitt in assiduous attendance, Grimes following. They never turned at the foot of the stairs, as he still hoped one, at least, might do. The loungers at the office drew silently back. Leavitt led his charges straight to the entrance and forth into the windy night where the new team was being quickly buckled in. Already the driver was clambering to his perch. Blake fairly sprang along the narrow hall.

"Grimes, go in there to Hollis; I must leave him a moment; I must speak with this—this lady."

"Mr. Blake, I protest," interposed Leavitt, as the tall officer stepped to the side of the veiled woman who clung closer to the lawyer's arm. "Mrs. Granger has undergone far too much agitation and fatigue. She cannot be further molested."

But Blake would not listen.

"Answer me, Mrs. Granger," he said, with stern emphasis. "If ever man was done to death in a woman's cause, here lies poor Hollis, craving only one word from you. He is conscious. He has told me the whole story. He knows that you were to be here this day. I adjure you, do not go until you have seen him." But she only shrank and looked appealingly to her legal friend.

"Answer me, Mrs. Granger!" Blake again demanded.

"Oh, how can you reproach me?" she almost moaned. "I begged him not to come. I warned him against such a rash undertaking. I made him promise he would not do so. He disobeyed me. I would do anything—anything that would be of the faintest use; but my physician forbids. The stage waits," she piteously faltered.

"The stage waits! Yes, and you are actress to the last. Here, by heaven, is one letter you have forgotten, —the letter you yourself wrote, bidding that scoundrel not to fail to meet your agent here—the agent you try to deny to me. What agent had you but poor Hollis whom you have murdered? I pray heaven I may never set eyes on you again. Go! In God's name, go!"

"Mr. Blake" said Leavitt, fiercely, "this lady is

under my protection, and such language is not to be tolerated !—Annie, stop that whimpering and help your mistress in. Come, Mrs. Granger, come."

And so, between them, they bundled their frail, shrinking charge into the dark interior. The girl would have turned again for one last look at the dim lights in the upper window, where lay the form of the man she loved, but Leavitt almost roughly seized and thrust her to the step, forcing her to follow her mistress, then sprang after them without another word. The landlord banged to the door and sharply turned the latch.

"Quick, now ! Jim," he called to the driver. Evidently the host had had his instructions. Crack went the whip ; the bays plunged at their collars, and, with sudden jerk, the old red stage bowled away down the frozen road ; and Gerald Blake stood there, ankle-deep in the snow, gazing after the dim, twinkling lights, with that crushed and blood-stained letter in his hand and a look on his thin and careworn face that was not good to see.

The last faint rattle of bit and trace-chain, the last faint rumble of wheels, died away in the darkness. The little knot of loungers drifted apart, some into the office, some over to the lighted bar, and still the tall soldier stood there, gazing fixedly down the road. Then, when every sound was hushed except the clink of glasses across the way, he drew from an inner pocket a case of worn, faded leather; took therefrom, after some effort, an old-fashioned ferrotype, smoothed out and stowed in its place the letter he had held in his hand, then raised the picture to the light streaming

from the office window. One instant there smiled at him the lovely face of a girl with soft gray eyes and a mass of wavy hair. Then, with sudden, fierce gesture, it was bent, twisted, crushed, creased, doubled into dozens of disfiguring folds, until not a semblance of itself remained; then hurled into a rut in the icy road and ground beneath his heavy boot-heel.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SUMMER-TIDE again, and how the vines and the little shade-trees have grown since August last! Surely this is Mrs. Stannard's piazza. Here are grouped half a dozen of the ladies of the garrison. They have changed but slightly since last we saw them, for army women seem to have found that for which de Leon sought in vain—the magic fount of youth eternal. There are strands of gray above Mrs. Waldron's kindly eyes. There are those who dare to say that Mrs. Freeman's lovely face has lost a trifle of its bloom—that Mrs. Truscott's golden-brown hair has parted with something of its sheen and shimmer and is now a duller brown. There are even those who dare to hint that that exquisite blonde, Mrs. Ray, is growing stout, and that the Worth dresses she brought over from Paris the year after that lovely wedding are utterly useless to her, even now. Mrs. Wilkins, whose laugh we can hear over there on the colonel's piazza, is unquestionably stouter; but a jollier creature never lived, nor one much more thoroughly popular. That laugh of hers can be heard half-way down the line, and every one feels like echoing, for hearts are light and joyous now, for the —th, which has been away for months, is coming home. Mrs. Stannard's smile is something that reflects the gladness of her heart,

even as the sunshine dances from the ripples of a summer lake. Who could stop to note that the lines about her mobile lips were just a trifle deeper? Mrs. Truscott's glorious eyes are even lovelier than when first they gazed along the serried line of the —th at arid old Camp Sandy. She and Mrs. Freeman are deep in a comparison of notes on needlework, at which both are engaged, yet every now and then their watchful glances are directed across the road to where, in noisy glee, the youngsters of the garrison are flying about,—even boy Jack toddling around with a croquet mallet in tow. There is no trace discernible of advancing years among these fair matrons of the frontier, unless it be in the accessions that have come to their ranks; for here come two or three who were not known at Russell in "the summer of our discontent," as Mrs. Turner had called it. Poor Mrs. Turner! They were speaking of her but a moment ago. Two big tears are even now clinging to the long lashes of Mrs. Raymond's dark eyes. It is three years, not one, since Mrs. Turner essayed the *rôle* of Mrs. George d'Alroy in the tailor-made suit, and those three years have brought their changes. Odd! There have been no theatricals in all that time. "Caste" was the final essay of the dramatic club of the —th for many a year. They have been talking of that, too. It is a perfect afternoon, late on a cloudless August day. Even the Cheyenne zephyr seems drowsing somewhere up among the gorges to the west, and the sunshine pours down in splendor and radiance upon the gray-green carpet of the parade, glints and sparkles from the new white railings of the band-stand, and intensifies and brightens the colors in

the great garrison flag which Waldron—loveliest and most thoughtful of commanding officers, say all the ladies—has ordered displayed to-day, in honor of the news that he is soon to be called upon to fall back to second place, for Atherton and the —th are homeward bound. Out at the stand the bandsmen have been playing delicious music. Here about the parade are gathered the many vehicles from town. Here on some of the piazzas some, at least, of the ladies who drove out to hear the music have been made welcome and are cosily chatting with their garrison friends. Here is our old acquaintance, Mrs. Morris, who has brought her sweet young neighbor, the rector's wife, to return some calls at the post, and everybody has been remarking how much Mrs. Hughes was benefited by her sojourn at the sea-shore the year before, and no one ever mentions how liberally the fort had contributed to the fund that made that expensive trip a possibility. Hughes is still the stalwart soldier of the cross, ceaseless as ever in his fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil,—and he knows more about the wiles of the latter than he did three years ago.

Most of the carriages are halted by the roadside. All of them, in deference to post custom, refrain from noisy or rapid motion while the band performs; but several of the number take a quiet, and one of them a showy, trot around the big quadrangle during the interlude. A very "swell" equipage is this that comes bowling up the road at the instant. Two gorgeous bays, with heads held very high by suspicious check-reins, high steppers and splendidly matched; their harness gleams with polish; the buckles, chains and bosses with

glistening plate. The reins are snowy white ; the open wagon is a gem. Two women sit on the high front seat ; a small tiger in top-boots and cockaded hat on the back. She who holds the ribbons and drives with practised hand is a Juno, a superbly handsome woman. She who sits by her side is an admirable foil. Lower down the road, as they pass, two officers rise and raise their caps, then subside into their chairs. The response to their salute is a bow and smile that make a combination irresistible,—certainly indescribable,—all grace, all graciousness. The fair driver converses perpetually with her prim, precise companion. Her lips very distinctly can be seen in rapid, ceaseless motion, but her eyes keep wary watch of her horses' ears and of every window, door, gateway, and piazza along the row. She misses nothing that can be seen.

"Color and horses' heads both too high to be natural," remarks one of the subsiding soldiers, as the team goes by.

"Yes ; but look at that figure ; handsomer than ever, by Jove!"

Up the row Mrs. Morris and Mrs. Hughes are just coming forth from the Stannards' hospitable doorway, within which they have been refreshed with tea. They have another call to make, and yet, before they go, many adieux to pay to the fair coterie gathered on the gallery. All have risen, and the visitors, laughing and chatting, have just reached the gate and are sallying forth when this stylish team comes prancing up the road. Both ladies instantly whirl about and bethink themselves of something that they had forgotten to say. Their backs are towards the road as the wagon flashes

by, its gracious charioteer bending far forward, bowing with a sweeping inclination of the queenly form and a smile that is winsomeness itself, though necessarily somewhat comprehensive and prolonged. Some of the ladies at the Stannards' pleasantly bow. Two or three smile, though rather vaguely. Some are engrossed in conversation and do not see the lady at all, until she has gone by. Then Mrs. Morris takes her departure, and there is a moment's silence. Some lovely eyes peep through the interlacing vine-leaves after the glistening equipage, and watch the repetition of the bow and smile, as the vehicle whirls by the colonel's gate, and then note the speed and action of the beautiful team as it goes spinning around towards the tower.

"She does drive beautifully," says Mrs. Raymond, at last, with a half sigh. "And isn't it marvellous how little she is altered, after all she has gone through! Did you notice how Mrs. Morris turned her back,—and Mrs. Hughes?"

"Oh! Mrs. Morris never speaks to her at all, and Mrs. Hughes cannot bear her, though, of course, as the rector's wife, she has to be polite," declares one fair authority who knows whereof she speaks. "It was her flirtation with Mr. Morris that brought Lawyer Leavitt to his knees. I don't believe he wanted to marry her at first; but when she began fascinating the banker it was too much for the squire, as it was for the banker's wife. It serves that glum old piece of parchment just right. They say he treated his first wife shamefully, and now he is being led with a ring in his nose."

"Well, now, do you know I rather like Mr. Leavitt

and we certainly ought to feel a sense of obligation to him," chimed in Mrs. Stannard, laughing. "She might have married in the —th, and then where would we have been?"

"Indeed, she wouldn't have stayed in the —th!" promptly asserts a young and impulsive matron. "She would never go knocking about from pillar to post, even with the loveliest regiment that ever was made. The —th would do to flirt with, perhaps, and I've no doubt when they get back she'll be setting her traps for some of them again."

"You don't suppose any of them will pay her any attention now, Mrs. Dana, after such experiences as—well, as Captain Blake and poor Mr. Hollis had?"

"Oh, I don't know; men are such fools sometimes."

Men are. There's no doubt about it, Mrs. Dana, and for shallower women than Madeleine Granger Leavitt. If she ever cared for anybody besides herself, it was, as Mrs. Wilkins more than once had said, for Leggy Blake when he was young and "good lookun." But that was years ago, and even Blake had long since ceased his attentions in that quarter. Perhaps it was the long illness that followed his winter at the cantonment that so changed the whilom devotee. Blake was very low for several weeks, and Billy Ray came back from the East, and went up to the Hills and fetched his old chum and comrade down to Sidney; and almost the first experience Marion Sanford, Mrs. Ray, enjoyed in her new army home was that of nursing her husband's devoted friend and comrade back to health and strength again. It took many a week to make much of him, and then the doctors had recommended a long sea-

voyage. And so it was that "Legs" went abroad and had his long voyage and afterwards spent part of the winter in Riviera, knocking about for a few months with the Freemans, and that was the best thing, up to this time, that ever happened to Blake.

Again the stylish team comes flashing up the drive. This time the officers on the veranda do not rise and bow, but simply touch their caps. They note with quiet amusement, however, the elaborate perfection of the bow, the profound inclination, the enchanting smile with which Mrs. Leavitt favors a little party of four just strolling up from the lower end of the garrison. The backs of this quartette are towards the equipage as it advances. They have to glance over their left shoulders to see it. The glance is a tribute to the appointment of Mrs. Leavitt's new "turnout," perhaps, but it necessarily includes the occupant. Two young officers raise their caps, the foremost with no inclination of the head whatever. Two young and lovely women bow with evident deference to the demands of the situation; but the bows prompt Mr. Foster, the rearmost of the two officers, to remark to himself that if Muldoon had put half as much ice in the lemonade of which they had just been partaking, the refreshment would have been far more palatable. But the fair charioteer gives no sign of distress. Again, left shoulder leading, with the graceful head turned still farther towards the four, she bends low; she smiles sweetly; she recovers with slow, languorous grace; then skilfully brings her prancing team to a walk and guides them into a vacant space close to the railing, and becomes absorbed at once in joyous chat with her

companion and in the music of the band. She hears a sudden bubbling of irrepressible laughter from the two fair girls she has passed. She notes unerringly how quickly it is suppressed. She knows full well that Foster has said something ridiculous at her expense, but still she gives no sign. The boy in his jovial way has merely sought to impress the ladies with his wit. He refers to that sweeping salutation as a "left forward fours left" sort of bow. There is nothing either malicious or harmful in it, but every breath seems to bear to the tortured woman's ears only malice, only hatred and contempt. Such things crowd into and fill to overflowing the bitter cup she quaffs with every hour of her life. In public she is forever smiling, except at church; and even there, mingling with the mien of rapt devotion, the corners of her soft, rosy lips twitch upwards like those in the earlier pictures of that arch dissembler, Talleyrand.

The ladies at Mrs. Stannard's hear the sudden burst of laughter, and there is a not unnatural craning of necks. It is a bride who comes. There is no dissenting voice to Mrs. Raymond's declaration that Mrs. Hayne is simply exquisite. She comes tripping happily along, leaning on her husband's arm. He is a resolute-looking young fellow with steely blue eyes, clear-cut features, and "grit" and character in every motion. The officers again raise their caps and bow with pleasant greeting to the charming group under the vine-covered porch. Mrs. Hayne's sweet face is wreathed in smiles. "We'll stop on the way back. We're going up to Mrs. Atherton's," is the answer to the pressing invitation to come in at once. All eyes are on them

as the four move blithely by. The tall, slender, elegantly-dressed girl, with the wonderful brown eyes and brows and sweeping lashes, glances backward over her shoulder and kisses her hand to Mrs. Freeman, who is peering lovingly at her through the vines.

"I do not wonder that Mr. Foster is madly in love with her," is presently the remark of Mrs. Raymond. "I declare, I'm almost ready to do battle with you, Mrs. Waldron. You did more than anybody to make that other match and win Nellie Travers for the Riflers, and now—now I'm awfully afraid Mr. Foster will prevail before the —th gets back, and we'll lose another prize."

"Do you think she cares anything for him, Mrs. Freeman?" asks one young wife and mother, with beaming eyes.

Mrs. Freeman is bending over that dainty needlework.

"She certainly has told me nothing about it," is the decided answer, while the fair speaker cocks her head on one side, smooths the pattern upon her knee, and regards it critically.

"Are they going to stay much longer—her uncle and aunt, I mean?" asks Mrs. Dana. "I do want to help entertain them in some way, but how can I, with only one room and a kitchen? If she were to marry Mr. Foster, now, they would have to get along with even less, unless they rebuilt those quarters across the parade."

"Nonsense! They could live in one of the lovely houses her guardian is building on that property in town. They could live in a dozen places if they liked,

and he would be a goose to stay in the army," is Mrs. Raymond's reply.

"*Mrs.* Freeman. *Did* you ever hear how such a queer character as old Bryan ever succeeded in marrying into so—why—superior a family? Mr. Crawford and his wife are charming."

"Yes; you see we got to know them quite well after taking Nannie East with us, and, being together quite a while abroad, Mr. Crawford told Captain Freeman a good deal about the matter. His sister was a mere school-girl when she fell in love with Bryan, who was a very fine-looking man in those days, and almost the only young one in the village where they lived. She was well educated, but he was a clerk in the village store, and fully fifteen years older than herself; yet it was a love-match. The Crawfords were opposed to it at first, but they were very poor then, and Bryan was soon to have a share in the business. He was bound to make money, even if he was illiterate. They were married and lived there until the war broke out. Mr. Bryan had gone out West, buying lands in Nebraska about that time, but by and by he got the war fever and served all through in the cavalry. Then he gave up his business East and moved out here before the railway was half built; but he had aged very rapidly, and seemed to have no thought for anything but money-making for years, except when he was on those periodical sprees of his. It took poor Mrs. Bryan away from her home and kindred, but it made Nannie rich."

And is this possible? Is the tall, graceful girl standing there at the Athertons' gate the "Prairie Nan" who so often came galloping by in that shabby

riding habit, frontier-made, not four years agone? Mrs. Atherton is taking in every item of her toilet at this moment, with eyes that express infinite appreciation and undoubted pleasure. She thoroughly approves of Nan. She is one of her stanchest friends. What will not two years under foreign masters do for a girl, she thinks,—even girls who cannot compare with Nannie?

So once again the "prairie waif," as she still laughingly speaks of herself, is revisiting the scenes of her girlhood. While her uncle is busy with contractors and lawyers in town and Mrs. Crawford is returning or accepting hospitalities, both in garrison and city life, Nannie spends long days riding or driving about the valley of the Crow, with two or three devoted young "doughboys" to choose from as escorts, with pretty Mrs. Hayne for a new friend, with kindly, cordial, loving greeting from dozens of faces that brighten at her coming, and with almost a mother's love beaming upon her from Mrs. Freeman's soulful eyes. It is to her arms she comes fluttering every night when the last visitors have gone. No one half knows the depth of the confidence, the love and trust and faith she has learned to rest in this wise and winsome friend—the first woman in all the —th to welcome her, a child, motherless and bowed with grief and anxiety, to the shelter of her roof, to the sweet sympathy of her pure and loving heart. Nannie Bryan thinks Mrs. Freeman the best and most beautiful woman in all the world. Mrs. Freeman holds Nannie off at arms' length, as this very evening she enters arrayed for a little dance at the hop-room, and marvels at the changes wrought even since their winter in the Riviera.

If Nannie Bryan could but see herself as others see her, is her mental comment, who could blame her if vanity became a besetting sin? The girl's lovely eyes are suffused, a blush of shy delight has mantled her smiling face. She cannot help reading the admiration in Mrs. Freeman's gaze.

"You like me in this dress?" she questions. There is no verbal reply. Mrs. Freeman's eyes are beginning to swim unaccountably. She looks fixedly in Nannie's face, after one emphatic little nod of assent. She has something on her mind.

"Why do you wear that locket with this dress, Nan? Does it quite accord?"

"No-o, but——" A deeper blush, a droop of the beautiful head, then a sudden shrug of the pretty white shoulders, a nervous little laugh, a half-sigh. "It's only a fancy, I suppose. You remember I—got it at Nice."

But Mrs. Freeman feels rather sorry for Foster, even though he is to be Nannie Bryan's escort to-night.

Yes, the —th are coming home. They have been widely scattered during the summer's scouting. The colonel with the entire command had expected a mountain camp and a season of field manœuvres in which all should take part. But first one battalion had to be hurried off to Southern Idaho to look after some turbulent spirits among the Bannocks. Turner and Gregg, Truscott and Ray had trotted westward on this mission, with old Stannard at their head. Then came orders to send two troops out along the Little Missouri, to cooperate with the cavalry from the North in looking after the Sioux hunting-parties. Another troop was

detached to escort the division commander on a tour through the Yellowstone, and still another to scout the southwestern slopes of the Big Horn. Freeman and Blake were of the escort, when there met them far up in the Wind River valley, just as they were in sight of old Camp Brown, a Shoshone Indian with a despatch. It contained tidings at which Freeman choked a moment, and then, with husky voice and suspicious moisture in his eyes, turned to the tall lieutenant riding at the head of the leading platoon.

"Blake, old man, you've got your troop. Turner's troubles are over at last."

Blake's long face grew longer and sadder as Freeman gave the brief details. In reloading his own pistol in his tent at evening Turner had unaccountably dropped it and Nellie Turner was a widow before the news could reach her. Poor Mrs. Turner! She had lived so long in garrison that the army had become her home. Fair and shallow and frivolous, she had led a butterfly sort of existence, living only for the day, dreaming of little beyond dress and gayety. Turner had never had anything beyond his salary. They had laid not up for the rainy day so sure to come. Indeed, he was never fairly out of debt. And now she had nothing but that slender pension. All her life, petted, spoiled, allowed her own way like some capricious child, she could not even realize the gravity of her situation. It was characteristic of her that when, after several weeks' prostration at the fort, she started for Massachusetts, Mrs. Turner declared she could not think of travelling without a maid, and Mrs. Raymond's Jennie, who longed to get back to the far East, sav-

here a chance of going at somebody else's expense and seized it. Many and many a time had the pretty woman's thoughtless tongue been the means of stirring social troubles at the various posts where she had flourished. Many a more genuine woman had cause to regard her with distrust, if not, at times, with aversion. But that was all buried and forgotten now. "Death, the great reconciler," had indeed interposed, and those gentle-hearted women vied with one another in deeds of loving care and thoughtfulness. Even now, nearly three months after the catastrophe that left her widowed and desolate, there were some whose eyes would fill to overflowing when Mrs. Turner's name was spoken. There were many who would weep as they read the forlorn and heart-sick letters she wrote them from the humble home where now she was dragging out her helpless, hopeless widowhood. Inert and idle as her hands had ever been, there was absolutely nothing to which she could turn them now. She never dreamed that the draft old Waldron handed her—Heaven forgive him the lie!—represented far more than double the sum her furniture and household effects had brought. She was even heard to intimate that she had been grievously swindled in the sale. Freeman and Truscott had lost no time in sending their cheques. Mrs. Truscott and Mrs. Ray had had a sympathetic little conference over the generous sum the latter insisted on handing to the major for the benefit of the stricken woman. And not one of all their number, not one of those gentle hearts, had failed to contribute substantially in some way or other to Mrs. Turner's comfort or support. They missed her sadly now that she was gone.

And Blake was now commander of the chestnut sorrels, Turner's old troop. He was away from it, to be sure, and far up on the Yellowstone when his orders came; for, though the general had offered to relieve him at once from duty with the escort, Blake preferred to spend the summer in a glorious ride through the wild mountains than in a monotonous camp at the Bannock Agency. No further trouble was looked for, and he longed to see the wonderful country through which the —th had marched in '77 on the campaign that he had been cheated out of. Not once since that windy night among the Hills had he exchanged one word with Madeleine Granger. They met—they had to meet—after his resumption of duty and her return from that protracted wedding-tour; but, though her bow and smile were as undauntedly radiant as ever, his response was formality itself. People at the fort were much surprised one day when Lawyer Leavitt drove out in his buggy and knocked at Blake's quarters. They did not know what Truscott knew, that "the squire" had written Mr. Blake to call upon him at his office when he happened to be in town, and that Blake had formally replied that he did not propose visiting town for that purpose, and if matters were of importance to Mr. Leavitt, possibly he could find time to call upon Mr. Blake at the post. But even Truscott did not know—did not dream what it was the lawyer had to beg of the soldier,—a favor over which the former stumbled pitifully in the asking. Mr. Leavitt desired him to promise that he would never allude to the letter written by Mrs. Granger to Brooks appointing the meeting at Custer, nor to the absurd claim made by

that person on behalf of his alleged sister. And Blake calmly replied that he declined to bind himself by any promises. The lawyer argued and pleaded, but in vain. Blake simply bowed him to the door.

Nevertheless, it was a matter he never referred to.

Late this very August evening, just as a little group came strolling away from the Athertons' gate, there strode across the parade, from the direction of the guard-house, a tall, soldierly-looking fellow in the familiar scouting dress of the cavalry. He was heading for the adjutant's office, but at the sound of the clink of the infantry sword worn by one of the officers in the party, followed by a murmur of conversation and soft laughter, he veered to the right and came speedily within hailing distance. There were just six in the party: Mrs. Freeman and Mr. Graham were leading; Mrs. Hayne, clinging bride-like to her husband's arm, came next, and, dawdling rearmost with evident intent to make the short walk long as possible, Mr. Foster was escorting Nannie Bryan. All three couples were brought to sudden stop by a joyous call from across the road, and the next instant Gerald Blake had leaped to Mrs. Freeman's side, and there was a babel of exclamatory welcome and greeting: "How on earth did you get here?" "Where did you come from?" "Where did you leave the troop?" "Where are the rest of them?" "Why, what a surprise!" "We knew, of course, you would be coming some time, but supposed it would be around by rail and that you would give us due warning." And so, in the excitement of the reunion with old friends and in the hubbub of question and answer, Blake never noticed what Mrs.

Freeman saw at once,—that Nannie Bryan and her escort held aloof. But Foster had marked with surprise the instant Blake's voice was heard, and his own impulse was to move forward and greet him, that it was his fair companion who drew back—that her hand tightened its clasp on his arm. One moment a fond, foolish hope thrilled through him that she thought to keep him there because of the joy she had in his undivided attention, because of her reluctance to permit others to break in upon their happy chat. But it died away the next moment, when he saw that her eyes were fixed on the dim figure of the new-comer, when he noted that her ears were deaf to every voice but Blake's.

"I was sent with paymaster's escort to the Hills," he heard "Legs" explaining, "and thence homeward. I've left our prisoner at the guard-house, Graham. Who's post-adjutant?" And then Foster had to come forward, because three voices summoned him. But he might as well have remained in the background. Official matters were uttterly forgotten the instant Nannie Bryan, blushing and with an odd little tremor in her voice, held out her hand and said—

"Don't you know me, Mr. Blake?"

Not for half an hour more, not until after the Haynes had left them and gone home, not until Graham had gone over to the guard-house and back, and Blake had told them all the news of Freeman and the troop, and it was evident that Mrs. Freeman was burning with eagerness to read the letters he had brought her but was too considerate of her guests to even peep within; not, in fact, until he had sat there practically speechless for over twenty minutes, listening to talk of

absorbing interest to everybody but him,—poor fellow! —did Foster realize that he were best away. Then Blake, too, would have gone, but Mrs. Freeman whispered, "Wait," and Foster bowed himself off the piazza and was lost sight of before his footsteps were out of hearing. This was a complication of which he had not even dreamed.

"Now come into the parlor," gleefully laughed Mrs. Freeman; "come right in."

"But, fair Lady Griselda, is not this marked remittance of your general rule? Never before within my recollection has any man been bidden within these portals at such an hour."

"Hush, Mr. Blake," was the imperious reply. "It isn't on your account at all. I'm simply dying to read my letters, and I want you to entertain Nan while I do it." But she could have hugged herself with delight—happy little schemer that she was—as she slipped away to the children's bedside and left Blake standing under the hanging lamp, where there was indeed but scanty room, and gazing with eyes full of mingled wonderment and pleasure at the tall and beautiful girl whom he had last seen in the Riviera.

Later that night, when he had gone, Mrs. Freeman turned to her lovely friend and *protégée*:

"Nannie Bryan, what have you done with your locket?"

"Did you not intimate that it did not quite match my gown, Mrs. Freeman?" was the arch response.

"And did you not, despite my criticism, wear it all the evening long until he came? You sly-boots! Do you suppose I have forgotten the day he bought it, just

after our visit to the fleet at Villefranche? You wouldn't let him see that you wore it, Miss Nan. What does that mean?"

Whereat Miss Bryan simply turned and ran away up the stair. She would be interviwed no further on that subject.

Next morning, as old Waldron was coming forth from his doorway, he greeted with evident delight the tall, bronzed, bearded captain of cavalry who sprang to meet him, looking marvellously alert and well in the new fatigue uniform, on the shoulders of which were glistening for the first time the double silver bars.

"Blake, old fellow, how glad I am to welcome you! What a ride you have had! And Foster tells me that you go West to join your troop at once, and that you caught that blackguard, Jamieson."

"Caught him up in the Hills, sir, close to Deadwood, where he has been, it seems, ever since his escape from prison. But it was not alone as an escaped convict we seized him, or as accessory to Granger's murder."

"No! What else?"

"It was he who shot Mr. Hollis. The identification is complete."

"By Jove! that is a capture worth the making. There was a garrison yarn of some tremendous denunciation you gave him just before starting East. He was sent to prison some three years ago; what was all that about?"

"That was about still another matter, sir," replied Blake, reddening through the bronze of his face. "You vaguely remember, I think, the robbing of Freeman's stable, though you happened to be away for

a while on general court yourself. I can only say that the rowing I gave him was for a very different affair. It involved a woman's name, and I believed him a liar"

The band had taken its station on the parade. Mr. Foster and the acting sergeant-major were at the edge of the road waiting for the sergeants to finish the brief inspection of their details over at the Riflers' barracks. The adjutant glanced quickly up the row, searching the line of piazzas for a tall, graceful form that had appeared regularly every bright morning for several days past at the Freemans' door-way just at the sounding of first call for guard-mounting. Yes; she was there now, she and her charming hostess and friend; but he could not see her face. Between Nannie Bryan and himself there stood the tall figure of Gerald Blake.

Ten minutes later, as the young adjutant finished the brief inspection of the guard and came marching out to the front, he noted that the lady of his love was leaning on the gate, her face shaded by her parasol, her head drooping; her attitude was one of rapt attention, for Blake, too, was leaning on the gate and talking eagerly, and Mrs. Freeman had come over to the next piazza, a manœuvre which not only left the two together, but headed off the possibility of interruption from that direction. Mrs. Freeman was capable of flights of generalship.

There was a lovely waltz the band of the —th used to play in those days, an old German "lied," with a sweet, mournful, sobbing strain running through every bar, and Nannie Bryan, dancing with Foster but the night before, had pronounced it exquisite. She had heard it in Vienna, and had there learned its name,

"The Loved and Lost," and Foster had thought it a dainty little bit of sentiment to have the band play it for her this morning, and had so ordered. A dozen feminine heads could be seen appreciatively nodding in time to the lovely melody as the band trooped up and down in front of the little guard, but Miss Nan seemed listening to no other music than the martial *basso cantante* of her trooper friend. A tall, gray-haired captain of infantry received the salute of the guard as new officer of the day, and, dispensing with the march in review, sent the little squad of a dozen men direct to its post, he and Mr. Graham following. Foster returned sword with a snap and marched straight to where Blake and his fair companion were standing. Intent only on heading off feminine raiders, Mrs. Freeman had left that approach unguarded, and Foster bore down upon the all-unconscious couple.

"Good-morning, Miss Bryan," was the sudden salutation. "Did you recognize the waltz?"

She looked up in absolute consternation.

"Oh, Mr. Foster! I'm so sorry. I was talking. I——"

Poor Nannie! She couldn't tell even a white lie with a face that turned so deep a red; but there was no need. Foster never halted an instant, but mutely accepted his sentence as he hurried on to the office. The *tête-à-tête* was brought to immediate end, however. Dismayed at her preoccupation, indignant at herself, Nannie brushed through the gate, declaring she must see Mrs. Hayne a moment, and that Captain Blake must go at once and pay his respects to Mrs. Stannard and the other ladies of the —th, some of whom, rest as-

sured, were already on the veranda and had seen him and marked his absorbed manner. And not ten minutes later, Blake, with something of his old genial self, at least, was seated in Mrs. Truscott's pretty parlor, with boy Jack on his knee, and with three fair matrons of the —th laughing at his sallies and mentally noting the great improvement in his appearance, when there came a sharp rap at the door. It was the orderly from the office, who came to say with the major's compliments that he desired to see Captain Blake as soon as he had finished breakfast.

"How can a man finish what he hasn't begun?" laughed Blake, as he quickly arose. "I'll see what's wanted, Mrs. Truscott, and be back in five minutes. Jump! Jack Junior."

It seems that Mrs. Truscott was to entertain half a dozen of the ladies that morning, for Marion Ray was to return to Sidney on the afternoon train, in order to get everything ready for her lord's home-coming. Mrs. Freeman, with Nannie Bryan and Mrs. Hayne, came beaming in but a moment after Blake had hurried away. Lucky fellow! It had been decided, though this was to have been a ladies' affair, that an exception should be made in his case, because he had to start westward that very day. Mrs. Freeman had sent word of his arrival as soon as she believed Mrs. Truscott was astir in the morning.

Ten minutes passed, and he did not come. Fifteen, and the breakfast was being ruined.

"We will take our seats," said the hostess, "and scold the one masculine representative of the —th when he finally appears."

But Mrs. Stannard's blue eyes were clouding with anxiety.

"I do not like it," she said, peering forth from the window. "You saw last evening's paper about the Indians at the Black Rock Agency?"

"Why, yes, Mrs. Stannard; but that is out of this department. Surely the —th would not be called on after all they've had to do," exclaimed Mrs. Ray, with paling face.

"Ah! It is never a question of what they *have* done in the army, but just at this moment Luce's battalion—our four troops—happen to be the nearest cavalry to the scene, and we know what that portends."

The hall-door opened hastily. It was Mrs. Raymond who entered, flushed and tearful.

"Such dreadful news!" she said. "Mrs. Atherton has just told me. The Indians have murdered the people at the agency, and they're coming towards the railway. All our regiment are ordered to meet them. Oh, Mrs. Freeman! You at least are lucky, for your husband is too far away."

And then breakfast was forgotten. The table was deserted. One and all the fair, anxious faces gathered about the next comer, Mrs. Atherton, who entered, despatch in hand.

"Think of it! Think of it!" she cried. "The Mertons with their charming party of tourists, who were here two weeks ago, are camping in the North Park at this moment without an idea of the danger!"

"Oh, is there no way of warning them?" was the shuddering question.

"Well, scouts rode this morning from Castle Dome, the nearest station. But, think of the distance, and then what good will it do? The Indians will be upon them before they can get out of the Park; and just think of Mrs. Merton and those poor girls!"

A horseman flashed by the window at the instant, the galloping hoofs spurning the gravel. "It's Captain Blake," she said. "A special train is going at once with every man we can possibly mount."

CHAPTER XXX.

"CUT OFF, and Either Killed or Captured!" "The Last News of Captain Blake!" Such were the headlines of the morning paper that brought weeping and desolation to more than one household in the stricken garrison one bright September day a week later. All over the broad, smiling landscape, all over that tumbling sea of prairie, far on every side there shone the radiance of peace and harmony. Cattle browsed placidly in the sheltered "swales" where the bunch-grass grew thickest. Children romped and laughed on the parade; stages and freight wagons went lumbering by to the northward; the trains on the railway wound, puffing, up the long tortuous grade to the westward summit. But on what scenes of tragedy had they not gazed, those serene, snow-capped peaks to the south! On what scenes of battle and massacre and terror had not these mute witnesses, the nearer heights to the West, looked down during the last few days, while here, nestling at their feet, lay this broad prairie fortress, smiling in the sunshine as though no cloud had ever cast its veiling shadow athwart its guarded lines. Murder most foul within its very gates. Assassination in the peaceful, placid valley, where the stream went softly babbling now. Storm and tempest, strife

and sudden death—all had marred its recent history. And yet from one scene after another the old fort seemed to rally like the battling skirmish-line to the merry music of its own trumpets, ready undauntedly to face each coming foe. Never had life seemed blither, brighter, dearer than the August morn when Blake and Nannie Bryan stood there at the Freemans' gate, and those bonny soldier wives, up and down the line, were donning their smiles and silk attire to meet him at Mrs. Truscott's. Then the lords they loved were homeward bound. Now, once more, the chargers were sniffing the sulphur-laden breeze along the mountain range, and the carbines ringing their death-shots among the echoing crags. Then this joyous band of women had gathered to surround and capture the new captain and restored favorite, since he had cast aside all old idolatries and knew no other goddesses but of their number. But what manner of band was this that held him imprisoned many a league away? Riding post-haste, the couriers had warned the tourist party of their peril, and guided them, abandoning their camp, backwards across the range; and the Indians who sought to follow and capture were grappled midway by Gerald Blake and the little force that had galloped at his heels. "Every man whom they could possibly mount." There rode Pet Hayne, his steel-blue eyes ablaze. There rode young Foster, eager to welcome brevet or bullet either this time; anything was better than lagging there at Russell now. There followed a motley score of Riflers, straddling their unaccustomed steeds, but envied of all their comrades who were trudging manfully fifty miles behind. "There would have been a dozen 'dough-

boys' to every horse," said the major, with tears in his eyes, "could the horses have toted more than one."

Far ahead, far out into the glorious Park country, the little band had lunged, rescuing the tourists in the nick of time. Then, revengefully, the whole tribe had turned and swarmed on them—on Blake—Blake, who had but forty men, all told. And there he lay battling among the boulders in the Yampah gorge, and not a rescuing comrade within possibility of hail. No wonder sweet young Mrs. Hayne lay terror-stricken at the post and that the women thronged at her door to minister and console. No wonder Mrs. Ray postponed her homeward journey, that she might be here where first news would come, where she could be "near Will" if anything went wrong. No wonder the wives of those who rode with bluff old Stannard clung to one another now in sympathy, deeper even than they ever felt before. Every one knew that he, with Gregg and Truscott and Billy Ray, with half a dozen eager subalterns and two hundred gallant men, was spurring hard to reach the scene; that there would be ringing music when those brave boys came riding into battle-line. But men's hearts sank at the thought of the hours that must elapse before they could hope to get in range of the besieged, and soft eyes filled with tears of dread and anguish. What would then the death harvest be? Yes, even at Mrs. Freeman's there were tears and prayers and long night vigils, even when that unconscionable woman, at least, should have been thanking heaven her captain had been sent so far away that there was no hope of his recall.

"Stannard's battalion crossed the Wolf River at day-

break," said the despatches, "with Blake still fifty miles away! The tourists are safe at Outram's ranch."

That night the round moon rises, silvering all the wild beauty of a gorge that is like some Highland glen transplanted from the very heart of the Trosachs. Down in the depths of the deep ravine, in ceaseless rush, a mountain torrent is brawling over its rocky bed, and here and there its foaming reaches glisten ghostly white in the radiance, and again, bursting over some granite barrier, it tosses a sparkling wreath of spray into the branches of overhanging pine. Out on the cliff-side to the west the growth is thick half-way to the crest; then, from this dark foliage of the slopes, there spring straight towards the glistening vault of the heavens great columns of red sandstone, bold, vertical, palisaded, with black rents here and there in their scarred faces, rents that the eye cannot penetrate in their depth and gloom. Here on the hither—the eastern—side of the gorge the ascent is more gradual and is thickly covered with pine and strewn with boulders; yet from this jutting point in the general rise one can see for fully a mile up the twisting gorge towards the south. There it narrows and is shouldered out of sight in the frowning front of the range. Turning about and looking northward, the eye roams over an expanse of valley opening out to billowy, treeless uplands, perhaps five miles away. It is the northern entrance to the old Manitou Pass through the Snow-Cloud Range. It is the pass through which the tourists, led by two faithful guides, came fleeing in dismay three days before, abandoning their rich camp to the coming foe as desperate travellers over snow-clad steppes toss backwards their

very garments to check and baffle the wolves snapping at their heels. It is the pass through which there burst upon the trail not six hours later a furious band of savages, drunk with blood and spoil, exulting in the thought that a few hours' gallop must overhaul the pale faces, burdened as they are with helpless women. Before nightfall their exultant hundred will have surrounded that huddling dozen, and then—death to the men!—but,—look well to it lest ill-aimed bullet rob the Indian brave of madder delight than even the scalp-dance in the glorious revel to come. God! What fate for those fair, dainty women! What horror for husband and father to contemplate!

But this is a pass long to be remembered and bemoaned among the survivors in the savage tribe. Just before the leaders, lashing their bounding ponies down the trail, had come in sight of the open stretch of rolling country, spreading far to the north, there rode into the narrow glen a grimy, dust-covered band of perhaps twoscore soldiers on groaning and exhausted steeds Some of these poor brutes break down before they can reach the banks of the foaming stream. All the others thrust deep their muzzles in the swirling waters and drink their fill. Then, on again they go. He who leads the party is tall, stalwart, bearded. He rides today as though he never lived out of the saddle. They who follow are worn, haggard, many of them sore, yet all grimly determined. Not more than five carry the carbine, all the rest are armed with the long Springfield of the infantry. These are the "Riflers" almost to a soul. They represent what is left of the eager command sent by special train under Blake, with orders to spare

neither horse nor man, to stop for nothing, to "get there at all hazards" and rescue those hapless tourists.

And here, at the very foot of the Pass—at its northward mouth—they have met. No time for more than brief congratulation. On with you! you who have women to shield. Haste them northward, fast as their strength permits! The Indians that get through that Pass in pursuit have got to win it first. Now come on, Riflers! Come on, lads! We've five miles farther to go before we reach the point to block them.

Blake thanks God for the hunting trips that filled those few bitter years. No mountaineer, no frontiersman, can tell him anything about the Snow-Cloud Range. Some of the horses can barely stagger farther; but, heaven be praised! they who have fallen are sacrificed in a glorious cause. The fugitives are safe so far. Now to make their escape a certainty! To remain with them out here in the open uplands means only to invite attack from overwhelming force where defence is next to impossible. There is but one solution to the problem,—seize that pass where it is walled, narrow and precipitous, where mounted Indians cannot get around, and then hold it like grim death till the end—whatever it be.

And here, in the narrowest part of the gorge, the grapple came. Down went the ponies and the leaders before the sudden fire that flashed from rock and tree. Back reeled those who were spared, dismaying the surging column in their wake. Then came the slow, stealthy Indian approach. Then the real trial of the brave fellows who had stemmed the rush of ten times their little force and now must fight for their own lives.

Every hour they hold the warriors here the jaded refugees are speeding farther towards safety and supports. They have got the Indians huddled in the gorge, but every man knows full well that though the fleet ponies cannot scale the heights around them, the Indians can and will; and, balked of their chosen prey, now far to the north, will fight like devils to revenge themselves on those who have slain their best and bravest.

And desperate fighting it has been. A few hours told the savages how trivial was the force that held them; but through them they could not break; every trial brought disaster; around them they could not go unless they left the precious ponies behind. They raged at the thought of being baffled by the white soldiers. Slowly they had accomplished "the surround." One by one Blake's poor horses were shot down from the heights, and lay stiffening there in a festering heap where they had been huddled near the stream. One by one Blake's men were picked off or driven from the rocks assigned them, until, twenty-four hours after the initial triumph, the tall leader found himself compelled to leave his four dead comrades where they lay, though covered deep with rocks, and to order a simultaneous dash down through the pines and boulders to this very point jutting out from the eastern slope, half a mile away. In the dead of night the little band stole from their lair, and, with the loss of but one more, reached the new stronghold. "And here, lads," said Blake, "we'll rule the roost till Stannard comes."

Then came another twenty-four hours, when no man could move hand or foot from his lurking-place but

the bullets came whizzing by. And now Blake is indeed sorely troubled. Pet Hayne is shot through both thighs and lies there pale, but uncomplaining. Foster has had a "close call." Four men are wounded, and they are suffering, for every drop of water is gone. "If only it prove clouded and dark as last night," he sighs to himself, "then we may slip down and re-fill the canteens."

But this night comes on at last, a vision of heavenly radiance. The moon rises in cloudless splendor and sails slowly towards the zenith in a sky that knows not a wisp of vapor. It is the third night of their vigil.

They rode in nearly forty strong. They are crouching here "not thirty weak," grins Blake, as he bends anxiously over Hayne. "Pet, old man, you and your Riflers and your 'long Toms' have carried off all the honors this trip. What a Godsend it was we happened to be there together. Can you hold out a day or so all right?"

Hayne set his teeth.

"I've got to, 'Legs'; so have we all. Stannard will be here in forty hours or so. How's Foster?"

"Huffy. He will hardly speak to me now. I told him what he saw was mirage; it couldn't be anything else, and warned him not to excite the men with false hopes, it would deter efforts to sneak down for water."

"Where is he now?" asks Hayne, faintly.

"Oh, back at his roost on t'other side. He and a dozen men watch that crest-line across the gorge. It's a mighty long shot from there, but the Indians have managed to send four of my best men to grass besides you, old man, and the bullets come singing close in

from there. We've got 'em foul on this side, though; they can't touch us except by a rush which will cost them too much. Lord! what a powwow they've been having over the dead already; but for the last hour, why—they've been as still as Gregg's catawba."

Hayne grins painfully. Even here, with death on every side, Blake's grim spirit of fun will crop to the surface. Gregg had made quite a talk in the regiment when he came from recruiting service about the wonderful wine he had been drinking. Afterwards he had ordered six cases of a man who applied to him by mail and who turned out to be a fraud, as did his wine, which, when uncorked with infinite flourish, proved to be a watered imitation of the brand the captain so enthusiastically praised.

"My God! I'd give ten dollars for a sip even of that to-night," groans poor Blake to himself, a moment later, as the feeble moan of a sorely wounded soldier comes to his ears.

"Can I do anything to make you easier, Horton?" he whispers, going over and kneeling by the man.

"For the love of God, captain,—water!"

Blake springs to his feet, dashing his hand across his eyes. "By heaven, lad, you shall have it," he mutters. "I can't stand this. There hasn't been a thimbleful since noon."

Bending low, he flits from tree to tree, from rock to rock, keeping in the deep shadows, dodging every moonlit space until he reaches the westward edge of the jutting bluff. Here, pallid and wan, two more of the wounded are lying under the trees, and he kneels

to answer the mute, but imploring, appeal in their fevered eyes.

"Never fear, lads; if you don't have water soon it shall not be for lack of trying. Are you in much pain, sergeant?" he asks the bearded Rifler, who is stretched upon a saddle-blanket under a stunted pine.

"A twinge or two, sir. But what hurts most is that I can't answer the shots from over yonder." And his left hand points across the deep and frowning gorge to the rocky battlements that overlook them as they hug their hiding-places on the spur.

"I feel that worse than you do, sergeant. You fellows with your 'long Toms' have kept down that fire as we never could, and," he mutters to himself, "we can't afford to waste a shot now. Our cartridges are almost gone. Let me have both your canteens, men."

"Why, who's going to make the try, sir?" asks the sergeant.

"I'll name him presently. A dozen would volunteer, but they have been forbidden so long as that fire continues as sharp as it is. What do you think their silence means?" And as he asks, Blake is slinging the canteen straps over his shoulder.

"Lieutenant Foster crawled over here a bit ago, sir, with the same question. He thinks they're holding a council of some kind. There's plenty of them there, though. All you've got to do is to strike a light among the trees here, or venture out along that ledge where the moonlight shines, and the whole crest will blaze with shots. Where, in God's name, do they get all their ammunition, sir?"

"Where they always have and always will, from their traders and these money-making white settlers—damn them!—Hello! what's wanted now?"

A quick, low whistle sounds farther to the right. Rifle in hand, Blake goes crouching through the pines, darting from one shadow to the next. A few seconds bring him to the northern edge, at a point commanding a perfect view of the gradually widening valley as well as of the palisaded rocks across the gorge. Here, kneeling under the eastern side of a big boulder, he finds Mr. Foster, field-glasses in hand. Blake crawls to his side.

"What's up this time?"

"What I said was up before, sir," is the almost sullen reply. "Take this glass and squint out there to the north. Our trail comes around the front of that butte. Horsemen were moving along it just now."

Blake, stretched at full length, raises himself on both elbows and gazes long and earnestly. At last he lowers the glass.

"You cannot wish it were our people more than I do, Foster; but it is simply impossible that the battalion could reach us before to-morrow some time; yet you were possessed with the idea it was in sight from here at sundown."

"I didn't say the battalion, Captain Blake. I said then and say now that, just as the brightest rays fell on the west side of a ridge way off there to the north, I saw what I believed to have been a troop of horse coming across in column of twos. It lasted but a few seconds and faded away; but I'm not dreaming, if I am dry. And just before I whistled I saw the same thing down

yonder in that big patch of moonlight,—a troop of ghosts, perhaps, only I don't believe in spooks."

"I can see nothing; but you may be right, youngster. God knows I hope you are, and that I'm wrong; but it can be none of Stannard's people, and what else is there to hope for? Now, where are your canteens?"

"Back yonder among the pines, sir; but there's no use squeezing them."

"I want some, all the same; then I want you and three of your men to cover me as much as you possibly can."

"Why, you're not going, captain? Surely, that isn't your business."

"It happens to be this time. It's simply a question of legs. Mine have been the butt of you Riflers so long that they ought to be crippled; but I can outrun and outclimb the best of you to-night, and I mean to prove it."

"You couldn't if you hadn't saddle-galled the whole gang of us, riding two hundred miles on your condemned plugs. There's more of us disabled by the infernal things than by bullets. If I could run or walk ten yards, you shouldn't go." And Foster shakes his head, dejectedly.

"Nobody need know anything about it, Foster, beyond yourself, at least until they begin shooting. Now, here's my plan. It's about three hundred yards down there to the water from this ledge. It would be useless to try it just now, for there's no moving object an Indian can't see so long as there's any light; but in half an hour or so the moon will be throwing the shadow of this bluff so that by going back to that clump of pines yonder I can creep in shadow along right under us here

down to within a hundred yards of that pool above the fall. Of course, they have watchers out all along the timber at the stream, and both above and below us; but there's no force down there to speak of. Most of the ponies have been led back and are up on top of the plateau at this moment. The beggars know we can't get away afoot, even if we could break through on this side. I count on getting down that far without being seen; then I'll sneak for it to the pool, fill the canteens, and wriggle back. If they see me and open fire, keep them off as well as you can. I'll show them a pair of heels up the hill-side."

Foster would again protest, but Blake shuts off further opportunity by slipping backwards from the ledge, and in another moment he is among the pines, quietly stringing the canteens over his shoulder, choosing those on which the covering is still intact, and thus diminishing the chance of rattling. Once again he cautiously makes his way over to the opposite side of his little fortress, avoiding the spot where Hayne is patiently lying, and keeping away, as much as possible, from the stations of the men. He does not want them to know of his hazardous attempt. And at last he has succeeded in gaining a point where, looking westward, he can see that already the northern face of the projecting bluff is almost entirely in shadow. Long since he has discarded boots and spurs and thrust his feet into light moccasins. Now, with nine canteens strung about him, he slowly and cautiously begins the descent. "Eight was about all a fellow could skip with up such a hill," he had muttered, "but I'll take one more and make it nine for luck."

Lightly now, stepping as though on eggs, and fearful of the faintest sound, steadying himself by the branches of the stunted trees, and keeping ever within the shadows, he goes crouching from rock to rock, from tree to tree, and at last finds himself at the western foot of the steep bluff, on whose crest his little party is ensconced. The moon, still on her upward climb, throws the shadows of the bold spur well down the more gradual slope before him, but he pauses a moment to reconnoitre. Another hundred yards, probably, he may hope to venture without discovery from the lurking foe. After that, broad moonlit spaces interpose between the shadows and the cool, rushing torrent in the gorge. Heavens! how tantalizing is its music now! How torturing to the poor fellows lying fevered there upon the bluff, praying for even one drop of blessed moisture from the wealth it is tossing over those senseless rocks. Another time how he could have revelled in the scene before him: the moonlight glinting on those lofty palisades across the deep ravine and silvering every boulder, spur, and tree-top, forming such contrast with the long black shadows thrown across the nearer slope, the deep gloom of every crevice and recess on the other side; but to-night nature is leagued with her savage children against the alien pale-face. Anywhere, everywhere among those opposite shadows the enemy may be in hiding. No man can prophesy from what point the flame may leap and speed the deadly bullet. If it were only cloudy, only reasonably dark, Blake might reach the tumbling waters unobserved; but it is almost as light as day.

No time to waste.

"If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly,"

he mutters to himself, old habits cropping to the surface now. He loosens his hold on the branch of a little pine, bends low, his right hand grasping the revolver in case he comes suddenly upon the hidden foe, and then goes scudding down the slope, making for a tree at the edge of the shadow, a tree that bends almost double like himself. No matter if the canteens clink a little now, the roar of the water is near enough to deaden the sound.

Another minute and, unmolested thus far, he has reached this gnarled and stunted oak, and now only a hundred yards farther he can see the white spray of the torrent sparkling in the moonlight, and a backward glance reveals the outline of the bold bluff, like some sturdy castle, double the distance and in rear of him. Now for the sternest work of all. Something tugging at his heartstrings seems to bid Gerald Blake look back over his life, bid him lift to heaven a prayer for the soul that any instant now may be set free from its earthly tenement and floating through space illimitable to the presence of its Maker. But even that thought he stifles. No time for overhauling the past. "Act, act in the living present," he mutters. "And God help me to help those poor fellows up the heights."

Out to the edge of the tree's shadow he crouches, then drops upon his knees. Some one is moving on the trail below. More than some one,—three, four, five,—he counts five ghostly shadows springing noiselessly down the ravine, Indians beyond question. They

are afoot, which is unusual. They are hastening northward. What does it mean? Can it be that Foster is right? Can it be that comrades are coming, that the Indian watchers have spied them, and that now all hands are slipping away to ambuscade them as they enter the gorge? Even as he kneels, his heart thumping hard, his knees and hands trembling with excitement, Blake catches sight of three more warriors hurrying in pursuit of the first. It can mean nothing else. It must mean that they are speeding down to trap the coming force, whatever it may be. Warning must reach it, or the would-be rescuers will be dead men. First, then, water for the wounded, then signals for their coming friends.

Still crouching, he runs nimbly down the slope; he picks the shortest line from bush to bush; he half slides, half leaps down the steeper bank as he nears the stream, and one minute more, all a-tremble, he has reached the edge of a deep pool just above the fall, has plunged his hands and face into the cool water, drinking long, deep draughts, and then, hardly stopping to unsling them, flat upon a broad shelving rock he is thrusting his canteens under water, laying, meantime, his ready revolver by his side. Two minutes suffice to fill them, to thrust home the stoppers, and then, dripping, he rises to his feet, and taking up his pistol, with one swift glance around, strides quickly back the way he came. Not ten steps has he gone when there is a whish as of the wing of a night-hawk past his ears; a second more a sharp "spang," and another whiz tell him that one canteen has been struck. Something flits across his eyes in the moonlight, and at the

same instant there flashes through his brain the explanation—arrows! He is seen; his pursuers are close at hand. They dare not use fire-arms, for fear of spoiling the ambuscade below. They mean to bring him down with their feathered shafts. One instant more and Blake, zigzagging right and left, though hampered by his pounding canteens, goes springing up the hill-side like a born Apache. The next moment three warriors leap from cover in pursuit. He is burdened; they are free. They come skimming up the slope, swift almost as their own arrows, and when Blake reaches the partial shelter of the big tree he goes down in a heap, pierced through and through the left thigh, rolls on his back, takes deliberate aim at the nearmost Indian, who, crouching, is just setting another arrow; and then the crags echo the loud bang of his Colt and resound to his stentorian shout,—

"This way, Foster! This way, lads!"

Zip! comes another arrow through the branches. Bang goes the Colt a second time, answered by a guttural cry below and by a rattling volley of carbines and a cheer of defiance and exultation from above. Again he aims and fires. Again he shouts his rallying call. And then, tearing down the steep decline, he hears his fellows coming. He hears Foster's brave young voice, hailing, "Where are you, Blake?" He hears the loud ring of shot after shot close at hand. He hears the sudden crashing volley far down the ravine; a glorious burst of distant cheers; a rattling fusillade, a crash of a hundred hoofs. He hears loud, joyous, welcoming shouts around him; defiant, furious war-whoops across the fire-flashing shadows of the

gorge. He is conscious of a louder singing in his ears, of a swimming of the head, of a deadly faintness creeping over him, despite his every effort. He hears a rush as of thunder up the trail across the stream. He realizes that bearded horsemen are plunging through, over, across, and then panting up the slopes, greeted by mad cheers from the bluff above and from the Riflers rushing to his support. He dimly realizes that a tall, stalwart soldier has thrown himself from saddle to his side and is clasping him in a pair of brawny arms. And then everything seems to fade utterly away as he murmurs,—

"Tommy Hollis, you've got more lives than a dozen cats."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE days of jubilee had come at last. The nights of vigil and prayer and dread anxiety were gone. Once more the old fort was merry with music and cheery voices, for the —th were home for good. What wondrous welcome had they when the long column of bearded troopers, stalwart and sun-tanned, rode jauntily into the post; the very horses pricking up their ears and looking as though they recognized every battered chimney and wind-racked gable. The band played its most rollicking marches. The women and children from "Sudsville" fairly screamed with delight as, one after another, some familiar and beloved face could be distinguished through the dust that coated the war-worn features. Over across the parade, along the verandas, the ladies were gathered in joyous bevies, while the little ones, gayly dressed in holiday garb, danced and shouted with impatient glee. The long line formed once more on the old, well-known parade. The colonel said brief word of commendation to his men. The standard was duly conveyed to head-quarters. The troops were dismissed to stables, and then came the rush of officers to the waiting groups along the row. A dozen carriages and vehicles of various sorts had driven out from town, and many of them accompanied the regiment on its march from the railway

station. There was little time now to pay attention to the occupants, but no one who looked could fail to remark the elegance of Mrs. Leavitt's toilet and equipage, even though there were women who raved at her in their hearts when she deliberately drove up in front of the quarters and reined in across the way, directly over against the group gathered at the Stannards' gate. That being a central position, most of the officers rode thither at once, and Mrs. Leavitt's manœuvre placed her conspicuously between these home-coming warriors and the "ladies of their love." Hers, therefore, was the first smile, hers the first welcoming voice, hers the first beaming face to greet them, and Mrs. Wilkins hardly had a word with which to hail her burly liege, such was the wrath and volubility of her denunciation of this utterly indecorous proceeding. True, not a man checked the rapid trot of his horse or paused to speak with her. There was a general doffing of the battered campaign hats and a few perfunctory bobs of the head; but one and all they hastened on, even the bachelors, for the moment old Stannard caught sight of Mrs. Leavitt he seemed to divine her object. "Well, if that woman hasn't the cheek of a cat. Don't stop, whatever you do," he muttered, as he touched his charger with the spur. And so even "the boys" rode briskly by, some few of the officers making a conspicuously wide *détour*, and one of these was Tommy Hollis, whom the garrison was ready to welcome with open arms.

"With weeping and with laughter," indeed, again and again had the tale been told of Tommy's exploit on the Yampah trail. A long, toilsome march had

Stannard made, even before he crossed the railway. Horses and men were grievously worn, when from fleeing settlers he learned how Blake with his little band lay beleaguered in the Manitou Pass, hemmed in by the whole insurgent band. It was impossible with jaded horses to greatly increase the speed, though Stannard meant to march night and day. But, as luck would have it, one troop had been detached and had had a two-days' rest at the railway. Gregg's horses, therefore, were comparatively fresh, and Hollis eagerly sought permission to mount forty light-weight troopers upon them, to leave behind their blankets, side-lines, every weighty or cumbrous item except arms and ammunition, and to make a forced march to the relief of Blake. Hollis, too, had taken to hunting since his slow convalescence from what, three years before, had been considered a fatal wound. He knew the country well, and was sure he could make his way to Blake, and that, once together, they could stand off the foe until Stannard and the battalion could reach them. The veteran major never hesitated an instant. Gregg's heavy men turned over their fresh horses to the two-score featherweights selected by the four troop commanders, and half an hour later, with hearty Godspeed from all, away went Hollis, disappearing in a cloud of dust far down the road, leaving the battalion to come jogging sturdily after. All the livelong day they alternated walk, trot, and gallop, stopping only to water at the few streams they crossed, and just at sunset the little band, armed to the teeth and ready for anything rode across the last divide and came in sight of the dark rift in the Snow-Cloud range.

"There's the Manitou!" shouted Hollis to his men; and again they quickened the gait. It was no mirage, therefore, on the northern sky that Foster had seen; nor were they ghosts who flitted through the moonlit patch two hours later. Knowing well that his coming would be watched, Hollis had here thrown forward a small advance-guard and moved with caution, scouting every defile and searching every grove until the sudden sound of firing up the pass told him he was within rifle-range of his comrades. Then all else was forgotten, and one impetuous rush carried him through. An hour's sharp fighting had followed his dash, but Blake and his precious canteens were carefully borne to the rocky fortress up the heights. Then Riflers and troopers united, and, with abundant ammunition now, they turned fiercely on the foe, and, though the Indians hung all about them another long day until Stannard's guidons came fluttering into view and Billy Ray's skirmish-line sent the painted devils tumbling over the eastern ridge, the besiegers were only too glad to keep at a distance, and content themselves with pot-shots from the crest across the gorge.

And then with another day the ambulances reached them, and the wounded were tenderly and carefully borne down the hill-side and trundled off by slow marches to the railway, and so back to Russell, where loving hearts and hands awaited their coming; where the women folk in congress assembled decided that it was Captain Blake's misfortune, and not entirely his fault, that he had no devoted wife to nurse and care for him, as had his gallant comrade Hayne. And so they invaded his bachelor den and put it in habitable

and attractive shape hours before the train with the wounded arrived; and thither the long-legged patient was borne; and there he was nursed and coddled, and fed with every dainty feminine ingenuity could devise; and there he lay propped up on the sofa, with two or three charming visitors to read or talk to him every afternoon; and there he scrawled facetious notes to Hayne, whose wound was far more severe, and sent them by his "Milesian Mercury," as he called Hogan. And there every evening, when Doctor Pease would permit, the officers would drop in for an hour's chat, and with every day the patient's spirits soared higher and higher, and people began to remark how like the old Blake he was again. Between himself and Ross of the Riflers, who was as marked a specimen of the stout and burly type as Blake was of the long and spare, the fire of chaff was incessant. For years the former had reviled the slender shanks of his trooper friend, and now Blake triumphantly demanded what he had to say, since they had proved invaluable in such a crisis. Ross responded that in Blake's exploit, where invisibility was a prime requisite, such legs would certainly "fill the bill," though they could never by any possibility fill anything else. Blake pronounced the episode a just retribution on his "doughboy" detractors, and provoked a groan of dismay by immediate reference to his case as a modern instance of the laws of retaliation. "Here's 'Legs Taglioni's' himself!" he declared,—a verbal contortion which, to the credit of his hearers, only a few of them understood and only one appreciated at its full value,—Doctor Pease, who instantly ordered the patient on half-diet for the

week to come. Ross used to stop at the hall and affably ask how fared it with "the lean and slippered pantaloon," and Blake, unable to leave his sofa or reclining chair, would hurl slippers and Shakespeare at him through the door-way; and thus were they engaged one lovely sunshiny morning just before the —th came home, when Ross, dodging an old shoe and deprecating a distorted quotation, nearly tumbled over two fair ladies entering, jelly-laden, and one of these was Mrs. Freeman. Ross presently found, as he had occasionally before, that he was needed elsewhere.

Warm and beautiful were the mornings of that early October, and there was gladness unspeakable in every face along the familiar old row in the week that followed the —th's return. All the livelong day the officers were busily occupied straightening out the troops after the dusty summer's campaign. Colonel, majors, captains, and subalterns were at work till evening gunfire, excepting only those who, like Blake and Hayne, were invalided and could only be nursed and made much of. And these were halcyon days for "Legs," especially after he was well enough to hobble about the post and choose his own company, for then it transpired that he was spending morning after morning in Mrs. Freeman's pretty parlor, while the children were at their studies and the fair hostess was "on household cares intent." And the ladies who came bustling in would stop short at the parlor door and say "Oh!" or "Ah!" in tone and manner most significant, and then declare they had merely come to see Mrs. Freeman just a minute, and would trot up-stairs or out into the dining-room, or even invade the kitchen,

after the manner of intimate acquaintanceship on the frontier; and Mrs. Freeman herself was looking even blither, bonnier, happier than ever, with such a merry and mysterious sparkle in her eyes, such ready dimpling smiles, such sage noddings of the head, when she and Mrs. Atherton got together for a semi-occasional conference. And the Crawfords had gone on to California to look after certain interests that that successful business-man had acquired in the land of gold and grape and orange; but Nannie Bryan had thought she would rather stay with dear Mrs. Freeman until their return, for Mrs. Freeman could not bear to let her go.

And they were gone all October, and did not reappear at Russell until after the snowflakes and the whistling gales began to warn the garrison that the long, long winter would soon be upon them; and even these warnings brought no dismay to the army colony. Once again the evening dances were in full blast. Once again the theatricals were organized with Tommy Hollis—"Helpful Tommy"—as manager and director. Once again the bachelors led off with the opening ball, and the neighboring garrisons were bidden, and there was solemn conference among the youngsters as to the distribution of invitations in town, and it was decided that Judge and Mrs. Leavitt could not be omitted from the list, despite the fact that there was war between them and the Morrises, estrangement between them and the rector, and strained relations between them and almost every household at the post. It was hoped she would not come. It was predicted that she would; and the prediction was well founded. She appeared in a gown that made the women gasp with

admiration. She never looked more radiant, more brilliantly beautiful. She was grace, gayety, joyousness personified. She danced untiringly, sometimes with Foster, with Graham, Webster, and Corry, who as givers of the feast were in honor bound to see that proper attention was paid to every guest, but mainly with a new-comer in Cheyenne, a tall young civilian from the far East, who had embarked in the cattle trade, and who had speedily fallen a victim to her fascinations, and was now her very shadow; a youth who scowled and bit his nails when she was dancing with her soldier-partners, and who rather too evidently allowed Mrs. Atherton and others to see that in asking them for waltz or gallop he was acting under instructions. Mrs. Atherton smiled benignly upon him and told him she was so sorry he was too late, but everything was taken. But she and Mrs. Gregg, who were receiving for "the boys," were simply irreproachable in the greeting they gave the Leavitts when they came, and in the apparent reluctance of their parting when, leaning upon the judicial arm, and with her embryo cattle-grower in attendance, madame said good-night soon after the german began. To the unspoken relief of everybody she had declined to dance it, so Hollis might just as well have led, after all. As it was, he seemed completely happy in having Mrs. Freeman for a partner; and time and again that night men came to Freeman to say that never had they seen her looking so blithe and well, when what they thought and what they said to themselves and one another was that never had she looked so lovely. The tall dragoon's eyes glistened as he watched her, and well they might.

There was a similar look in Jack Truscott's bronzed face. There was almost the same light in Pet Hayne's blue eyes, as he lay in a reclining chair at the lower end of the hall. There was something of the same expression in "Leggy" Blake's lined visage, as he sat beside his fellow-invalid. Probably each man was trying not to show the worship that filled his heart. Three of them were utterly in love with their own wives, and one at last had realized that, despite his years of thraldom, he had learned to love anew, and this time with an intensity, with a passion and reverence and tenderness and humility that seemed at times to overpower him. What had he, almost twice her years, battered in service and stained with the knowledge of that old and shameful servitude, to offer one so pure and radiant as the fair young girl about whom all the men were clustering to-night. Mrs. Granger Leavitt, who had made her adieux all smiles and radiance, spoke not one word to her gloomy lord upon the homeward drive. She had heard the rumors that were afloat. She read the transformation in her whilom lover's eyes, and knew that now, at last, her power with him was gone forever.

And all through that joyous evening it was something worth noting that every few minutes there would be a cluster of fair women about those reclining chairs at the end of the hall where sat, like sultans enthroned, the two wounded officers. The "Cripples' Delight" Blake had dubbed their corner. Mrs. Hayne was one of the loveliest of lovely pictures at the ball, and, "troopers and plodders" both, the young officers hovered about her pleading for dances. Her fair face was

flushed, her eyes sparkling with pleasure; yet after every number she would find a way to guide her partner to that corner where Pet reclined upon his cushions, and there to bend over to assure herself he was not getting wearied. She would promise no dance after midnight, which hour Pease had fixed as the limit of his patient's stay, and Colonel Atherton's own easy carriage was at the door to bear them homewards when, with half the men in the room about them, and Doctor Grimes in close attendance, the young infantryman and his charming bride withdrew. But Blake was further advanced in his recovery and was accorded longer stay, and there he sat for another hour watching the mazes of that lovely german and trying not to show that he was watching, with his heart in his eyes, the tall, graceful, exquisite girl whom Mr. Clark was so lucky as to have for partner. All through the evening Blake and Hayne had been holding a genuine levee, but now that Hayne was gone and the german was fairly begun, and many of the elders among the townsfolk had retired, and many among the older officers had betaken themselves to whist, "Legs" was left more to himself, and was silently, wistfully gazing on the animated scene. What memories came surging up in his mind as he looked along the brightly-lighted hall, with all its martial blazonry of flags and bayonets, guidons and sabres, trumpets and drums. How well he recalled the first time he saw it so decorated. It was the night before he marched with Billy Ray and that big detachment of recruits to meet the —th at the close of the Sioux campaign. It was the night—ah, well he remembered it—when Ray had stepped forward under that very

chandelier where Miss Sanford was standing with all that bevy of beaux about her, and had borne her away, practically, for good and all. She, the belle and beauty of the season, had learned to love his gallant friend and was glad to share his lot and be a soldier's wife. Blake, shading his eyes with his hand, could almost fancy he saw them now, gliding slowly about the room, her lovely face suffused, her eyes downcast, and his so full of hope and resolution. He could see them as they turned suddenly to that very door-way where Ray snatched his cavalry cape from the chair, and together they vanished from the hall, followed by the sweet, plaintive strains of Immortellen. He could see the radiance in Billy's face when, ten minutes later, they reappeared, and the shy, tremulous joy in hers. He remembered vividly the clasp of his comrade's hand that, the moment they were alone, told the whole glad story. What infinite happiness had been Ray's! What perfect recompense for all the trials and trouble of his past! Why could not he too find such joy to crown his life? God knows he had had suffering as keen as Ray; but, ah, how different had been their lives! What hope could he have with all the humiliating story of that first love, that long, wasted love, staring him in the face? He did not dare think of that and then of Nannie Bryan. How well he recalled the first night the child had sat by his side, peeping through that canvas screen upon the brilliant german of three years ago; he, absorbed in watching Madeleine Granger and utterly ignoring the slender girl who gazed so piteously in his face, as though begging forgiveness for having unwittingly cost him the privilege of dancing with the

belle of the ball. Heavens, how the recollection stung him! He looked upon the old familiar stage and bethought him of still another night, that night of min gled mirth and madness, of exasperation at one instant, of thrilling and delirious triumph the next. He could hear that siren voice even at this moment, as with her soft warm lips so close to his face she murmured, "Don't you know I would do that always now?" He shuddered, actually shuddered, at the recollection, and instinctively covered his face with his hand.

The next thing Blake knew, a charming woman was bending over him. There was a sudden outburst, an irrepressible clapping of hands, for Mrs. Atherton, instead of carrying to some dancing man her favor - a little silver bell,—was smilingly pinning it on the breast of Blake's uniform.

"There, sir, you shan't sit here looking tired and wistful, if I can help it. I'm only sorry you can't dance; so is somebody else I know of," said her ladyship, as with sage and significant nods she surveyed her work and laughingly waved her handkerchief to the applauding throng. Blake seized her hand and straightened up in his chair, all the old gladness of his nature summoned to instant life by the womanly tact and sympathy.

"I'll kiss thy foot. I'll swear myself thy subject," he declaimed, as he gazed up into her laughing eyes, and then, before he could bend forward to press his lips in homage upon the dainty glove, Mrs. Freeman was at his side. She, too, was busily affixing another tiny bell upon his breast. In ten minutes Blake discovered, to his huge delight, that the ladies of the —th

were making him the hero of the evening; for, one after another, they came to decorate him with their pretty favors, and presently their example was followed by the girls from town. By the time the fourth figure was finished, Blake's uniform was all rainbowed with fluttering ribbon and sparkling with bells and fans. Tommy Hollis was the only man who could begin to compete with him, and still he was not happy, for one sweet girl had held aloof.

"Blake," said old Pease, as the dancers were promenading the room before the fifth figure began, "'twas time for you to go two hours ago. Now, go you've got to. The ambulance is waiting, and so am I."

Blake rose reluctant. He glanced quickly about the crowded room, though he knew she was not there. He had seen her but a moment before disappearing with Mrs. Freeman and their partners for a stroll upon the piazza without—the same door through which Ray and Marion Sanford had vanished that memorable night so long ago. It was Clark whose arm Miss Nan had taken, whose cavalry circular was even now wrapped about her pretty shoulders. Blake limped painfully away at the doctor's side, striving to reach that door unnoticed. He did not want to have to say good-night to any one. If go he must, he would slink away unseen.

"Get my cape, will you, Doc?" he said. "I'll go right to the door."

But there stood some town carriages instead of the ambulance. To reach the latter he had to hobble a dozen yards further up the narrow porch,—to go straight towards those chatting groups of fair women

and attendant cavaliers. He heard Mrs. Wilkins's jovial voice and Mrs. Truscott's happy laughter. He caught sight of Mrs. Freeman's bonny face, the light that streamed from a window gleaming through the red gold of her hair, and then, just behind her, came the lovely girlish face, the tall slender form he had grown to worship. Sadly for a moment he gazed upon her, and then, sudden and all in an instant, a swift, wild hope, an almost delirious joy possessed him. Plainly he saw that as they reached the window she had stooped and peered into the hall directly towards the corner where he had been sitting all the evening. Plainly he saw the quick, sudden change that overspread her radiant face. Plainly he saw that she had stopped short, swept the room with anxious, searching glance, and then, as though conscious of this self-betrayal, had as quickly recovered herself and taken her escort's arm.

"Shall we go in, Mrs. Freeman?" he heard her say. "It must be time for the next figure." And then Blake held forth a trembling hand.

"Oh, Mr. Blake!" cried Mrs. Freeman, ignoring the recent double bars and clinging to the title of their years of friendship. "Surely you're not going yet and —and," with odd irrelevance, "Nannie's last ball. I hadn't dreamed of such a thing!"

"But it's after two and high time we were going as well," quoth Freeman who suddenly appeared. "Blake, suppose you give these women folks a lift in the ambulance. I will fetch their wraps; and, just wait in the house until I come, and we'll have a glass of Clicquot to wind up with."

What marvels of contrariety some women are! At any other time would not Mrs. Freeman have pleaded for just one more dance? Would not so young and enthusiastic a maiden as Nannie Bryan have begged to be allowed to finish that most delightful german? How was it,—why was it that the latter should have hung there shy and silent?—that Mrs. Freeman, who had been the picture of animation and life and health all the evening, should suddenly discover that she was really tired? She had no idea it was anywhere near so late. It was scandalous. Here the Crawfords would be back from California on the morrow; and Nan would be looking pale and dragged, instead of the blooming maid they had left. It would never do. In vain Hollis pleaded; she bade him go and finish the german with some of those pretty girls and indefatigable dancers from town. She sprang lightly into the ambulance, told her husband to say good-night for them, summoned Nannie to follow, then Clark and Pease between them boosted their silent friend into the dark interior. "Drive to Captain Freeman's," said the doctor; and how it happened Blake never quite could tell, but he found himself seated by Nannie Bryan's side, well forward in the gloomy vehicle, and Mrs. Freeman had slid sidewise along the opposite cushion and had engaged Clark in animated chat the moment he tumbled aboard. Away rattled the ambulance on its jog around the big quadrangle. Merrily rippled the laughing, ceaseless chatter at the open end. Mrs. Freeman was covering Clark with blushes and confusion, engrossing his entire attention by the liveliest possible fire of accusation about his cruelty to that pretty little Miss

Thurston, the rector's niece, whom he had plainly fascinated on her arrival, the week before, and as totally neglected this night of nights. There was nothing to prevent Blake's having a word of his own with the sweet girl at his side; but, though his heart was beating hard, his lips were stilled. Womanlike, it was Nan who first overcame the dangerous silence.

"I thought we would be there for another figure," she faltered, presently. "But you were so covered with decorations, I suppose there was hardly room for more." He was silent still. He bit his lip to stifle the words he longed to say, that though from every other hand he had received sweet and gracious tribute, it was all as nothing worth, because one touch had been withheld. What right, what right had he to speak of love to her?

Her head had drooped; her eyes were downcast as she spoke and still were lowered, but his silence pained her. Timidly she glanced up in his face. She could not bear the thought that he was angered,—that she had given him pain. No one on earth had ever dreamed how Nannie Bryan's girlish heart had long since learned to twine its tendrils about the tall and sad-faced soldier,—almost the first officer she ever knew, the very first—as she used to say—who had ever spoken to her "like a lady." Even Mrs. Freeman, loving her well and knowing her as she did, only partially read her secret. The tears, unbidden, were starting to her eyes. How could she make him understand that it was not because she had not longed to add her tribute to the rest that she had held aloof? How could he know how many, many times she had striven to

muster up courage to trip quickly to his chair and pin her little knot of ribbon on his breast; yet time after time her resolution failed her. She could not do it, and now he felt it; was hurt and disappointed in her, and she so soon to leave; so soon to go back to the East and see her tall soldier friend no more.

"You are not angry with me, are you, Mr. Blake?" she pleaded, softly. "Indeed, I did want so much to come and give you a favor, but I could not there, and yet I really meant to the very next figure." Heaven! Could mortal man withstand so sweet a penitent,—so fond and fair a pleader?

"What's the matter there, Rorke?" shouts the quartermaster at this juncture, as the ambulance lurches suddenly to one side. "Drive steady, man."

"It's them murthering mules, sorr; they'd shy at a——," and the rest of Rorke's explanation is lost between a resounding and ostentatious crack of the whip and a coincident thickness of utterance. A wild jerk of the vehicle results that topples its occupants rearwards, and, as Nannie Bryan is leaning towards him anyway, a wealth of curling tresses comes sweeping to Blake's very lips, mingling with his dark and drooping moustache; an unseen, but beautiful and beloved face is flung upon his breast. Quick as a flash his arm is thrown about the slender form and holds it close. For a moment the ambulance reels and sways as the outraged animals dash along the roadway. Clark springs through the narrow space between the parallel seats, tears aside the front screen, and grasps the reins, roughly shoving the bewildered driver to one side. Mrs. Freeman, uttering no sound, clings pluck-

ily to the rail with both hands. Nannie Bryan, whose heart is bounding with the sweetest terror it ever knew, has nothing to cling to but Blake. And as for Blake, surely he might have found something else to cling to; but then it was so very dark. One moment more of mad mingling of fright and ecstasy, and then Clark's strong hand and commanding voice have controlled the frantic mules. The ambulance reins up at Freeman's gate. Mrs. Freeman, unassisted, springs lightly to the ground, and somehow—somehow in the darkness and confusion Nannie Bryan's glowing face is for one moment uplifted and her sweet, warm lips are fettered by one long, fervent kiss, the first she ever knew.

"Blast you, Rorke!" storms the quartermaster, as the ladies scurry within the gate. "I've never been so close to Hades in my life."

"Bless you, Rorke!" murmurs Blake. "I've never been so close to heaven."

What wondrous times we had at the old fort over that engagement! What wondrous joy shone in Blake's sparkling eyes and rang in the music of his voice! What wealth of congratulation poured in upon him from every side, and how indignant was Nannie Bryan afterwards because some people said all the congratulation should go to him. Old Buxton, who had been promoted to another regiment, had of course something mean to say when he wrote. Indeed, there were younger men who thought that Blake, like Ray, had far more luck than he deserved. But Blake disarmed all such commentators by prompt asseveration

that no fellow began to know that better than he. Mrs. Wilkins, who had declined an invitation to a reception to be given to Judge and Mrs. Leavitt in town, reconsidered when the engagement was finally announced, in order that she might have the infinite comfort of being the first to proclaim it to that lady, and a very telling feat she made of it. For weeks after Nannie was spirited away by her returning relatives, Captain and Mrs. Freeman were the only ones who knew the truth, howsoever much it may have been suspected. But the Crawfords were anything but reconciled to the idea at first. Uncle Fred, in fact, was fairly stunned when he received Blake's manly letter. He looked upon Nannie only as a child. He was even disposed to consider Blake, whom he had only casually met, a fortune-hunter, who had taken advantage of her tender years; and there was a serious breach between these two, caused by the fact of Crawford's writing that her fortune was nowhere near what people supposed, and that most of it was in unproductive ranch property and real estate. Leg's answer to this letter made the avuncular eyes pop in their sockets. The captain got a month's leave, stopped at Sidney long enough to see Billy Ray and Marion and open his heart to them; then on he went to Pennsylvania, bringing bliss and surprise unspeakable to Nan, whom he strove to keep in ignorance of her guardian's letter, but whose clear eyes saw at once that something was wrong.

* * * * *

. . . . "I cannot get thine uncle's love,
Therefore no more turn me to him, sweet Nan,"

he parodied, striving hard to laugh off her anxious query; but presently she came at him with point-blank questions that he could not dodge, and learned at last the nature of Mr. Crawford's missive. And then how the mountain breezes blew and the wild West came storming in upon that sacred study, wherein sat the master of the house at his books, all unconscious of the wrath to come. "It was like one of your Cheyenne zephyrs," said he afterwards; "I never thought to hear the like from our precious Nan." He had planned to take her abroad for another year, that she might recover from this sudden and romantic fancy, as he supposed it. But when in a storm of indignation and reproaches and tears she poured forth her heart and told him she had just loved Gerald Blake ever since she was a chit of fifteen, ever since that awful night when he went hunting the prairie for poor father, and was nearly killed, all for her sake, and now to think that her kith and kin should so insult him! Go abroad? No! Wait a year and think it over? No! And the pretty foot came down with a stamp that shook the lamp-shades and shattered his every purpose. She *would* have waited, had he been just and kind to Gerald. She *would* have been docile and obedient as they could wish, had Uncle Fred behaved even civilly to him; but now—now that he had seen fit to write so scandalous, shameful, outrageous a letter to the man she loved, she would marry him the instant he claimed her, and if they strove to come between them again she'd go to dear Mrs. Freeman until Gerald could be ready for her. There at least was a home; there was love; there was sympathy! "Heavens and earth!" said Crawford,

as he told the tale to Atherton in the spring; "I used to wonder what Muldoon meant when he said Miss Nan could blow a man sky-high if she thought he was leading her father astray, but never until that day did I begin to know what a tongue and temper she had when aroused." Poor Crawford! Nan's was not the only flagellation he received that day. When she rushed to her room in a passion of tears, Aunt Effie had of course followed, wondering, and sympathized and investigated and heard the story of her husband's letter to Blake, and then she, too, "came down like the wolf on the fold," and the sum and substance of her remarks were that she didn't dream that he could have been such an idiot. Why had he not consulted her before writing to Captain Blake? She knew all along that Nan would never listen to any other lover on earth. How many a man is there on whose eloquence hundreds of his kind hang fascinated, whose "dictum" dozens back with every dollar they can raise, whose sword has carved the way to fame and fortune, and whose self-confidence might well be almost boundless, but for the candid counterbalance of his wife's opinion. Crawford meekly begged them mercy—these irate women who would not come down to tea, and ruefully and obediently went off and called for Captain Blake at the hotel.

And so with the Christmas holidays came the formal announcement of Blake's engagement, which every one suspected, but which none could prove. And all the winter long the sunshine poured in cloudless flood upon his pathway and shone reflected in his glowing face; and with the springtide Mrs. Freeman fairly seemed

to bubble over with business and bliss. All the new furniture was coming, all the carpets, curtains, rugs, and portières; and she and Mrs. Atherton were spending hours every day ordering the long-legged captain this way and that, banishing all relics of bachelor occupation from his den and beautifying, as only women can, the home of the coming bride; for now, as Mr. Crawford expressed it, Nan had broken out in a new place and taken the bit in her teeth again. The day for the wedding had been duly set. It had all been arranged that Blake was to apply for three months' leave of absence, and on the first of June he and "Helpful Tommy" were to go East; and Captain and Mrs. Freeman, with the children, were to start from Russell; and Captain and Mrs. Ray, with little Sanford, were to join them at Sidney; and Blake and Nannie were to be married at the Crawfords' cosey home. But, in army life, no man knows what a day may bring forth. "Hold your regiment in readiness for a summer in the field" was the confidential notification that came to Atherton late in April, and it was speedily known that, though hostilities were not feared, the —th was to patrol and guard the beautiful park region where the red man rode in triumph but the year before, and so protect the emigrant and settler now moving in. Ray and Freeman could not hope to get a leave. Blake and Hollis could not ask for more than a fortnight, and even as "Legs" was lamenting the changed prospects there came to Mrs. Freeman a letter from Nan that caused that fair matron infinite delight. Its counterpart that came to Blake made his dark eyes glisten.

"I know you will not come without the captain,"

she wrote, "and my mind is made up. After all, this is not my home. Am I not still your Prairie Nan, dear Mrs. Freeman? Is not my real home out there at the old ranch, in full view of the grand, snow-clad peaks, and almost under the shadow of the flag at dear old Russell? What sort of wedding would it be to Gerald if Captain Ray and Mr. Hollis were denied him? What to me if you and dear Captain Freeman and my precious Dot and Harry could not be among the first to wish me joy? And then there is another reason, I'll tell you some day; but uncle has yielded—he simply had to—and I'm coming to be married there, as you, dearest, sweetest, truest friend, once said I should be, and in three weeks we leave for Cheyenne."

What was the other reason?

Four times that winter had Blake declined invitations to parties which Mrs. Leavitt was expected to attend in town. Thrice had letters come to him which he returned unopened to the writer. One brilliant Sunday morning, as he stepped from the church door at Mrs. Freeman's side, a laughing voice accosted him, and Mrs. Leavitt was at his elbow.

"Pray forgive me, Mrs. Freeman," she said, all winning smiles, "but, like other men, our captain forgets old friends in new-found bliss. Gerald, in answering my last note you did not think to tell me one thing,—what shall I do with that little packet I have of yours? Do you prefer to send for it, or shall I express it to your *fiancée?*"

Blake stopped short, astounded for an instant, though her words left her meaning in no doubt. Mrs. Freeman, startled, speechless, looked first at the fair, inso-

lently smiling woman who now turned and confronted her escort, and then at his stern, wrathful face. His eyes seemed to blaze. His lips quivered under the long, drooping moustache, but in a moment he recovered himself, and with infinite politeness, with almost airy grace, he raised his hat.

"Will you really be guided by my wishes in the matter, Mrs. Leavitt?"

"Assuredly, Gerald," she answered, with radiant, winsome mien. "Why else should I ask?"

"Then will you oblige me by sending it direct to Miss Bryan? You have her address, as I happen to know." Again he raised his hat, and without another glance handed Mrs. Freeman to the carriage and took his seat by her side. And so it happened that Mrs. Freeman half divined that other reason before Nannie Bryan ever told her. The packet, duly forwarded by express, contained some trinkets and two old letters which Gerald Blake had written to the sender, with Mrs. Leavitt's congratulations, and within another week, unopened, they were in the captain's hands. He had long since told Nan the whole direful story, and Mrs. Leavitt's bolt fell harmless to the ground. Even when she knew that there were two men who held a secret that could crush her, she dared to aim this blow, for well she reasoned that, come what might, neither Blake nor Hollis would ever stoop to tell the story of that other wife whose silence cost her wretched lord so much more than the prize was worth.

"But I wish to be married right here before her very face," said Nannie, with flashing eyes, as she told the story to Mrs. Freeman afterwards.

"And it shall be just the loveliest wedding ever seen at an army post," was Mrs. Freeman's answer.

Well, if it wasn't, no blame can attach to the host of loving friends who crowded to do her honor. Early in the winter the new "administration building" had been finished, with one long apartment designed for chapel, school-, or hop-room, and here for several days the quartermaster had his carpenters at work, putting up, framing, and rearranging the aisles and seats. Meantime, far out among the foot-hills, brawny troopers had been hewing down the only trees that could preserve their green, and the post-wagons came in laden with pine and cedar branches. And then all Monday and Tuesday of the last week in May dozens of fair hands and stalwart arms had been busily at work,—"Helpful Tommy" in the van. And huge boxes of smilax had been shipped from Denver, and all the bright-hued guidons had been pressed into service, and scores of glittering sabres and hundreds of cavalry plumes, and the Crawfords were guests of Colonel and Mrs. Atherton, and the Rays had come to spend the joyous week with the Truscotts. Nannie had her old room at the Freemans', where she gave audience to almost every woman at the post. How could they help crowding to see the lovely things that made up that wonderful trousseau! Trunks and boxes blocked up every spare inch in the hall-way, but proved no barrier to sight-seers so enthusiastic, and only at odd intervals, brief, stolen seconds—not minutes—could Blake catch even a word with his fair *fiancée*.

"Was ever a man so utterly in the way?" protested Mrs. Freeman. "Do go home,—go somewhere,—any-

where, and leave us in peace. You are going to have her all to yourself after Wednesday; for mercy's sake, be rational now. Can't you see how much we have to do?" Blake couldn't by any means; but what man ever could or ever did understand those ante-nuptial ceremonies which are so indispensable to the other sex, and which usually result in the prostration of the bride elect? Day after day, from morn till late at night, she was besieged by feminine visitors; army girls not yet engaged, but wildly enthusiastic and sympathetic; girls who would come in at guard-mount and hang about her until tattoo; girls from town who, uninvited, would come out "to spend the day and help;" young matrons and old from town and garrison, and one and all had to see the contents of those trunks and boxes, and feel the texture and exclaim over the sheen of silk or hue of ribbon, and gasp over the bewildering patterns of the laces and embroidery; and the army homestead echoed with superlatives, and nothing was distinguishable above the general chorus of "sweet," "exquisite," "too lovely," "perfectly beautiful," "simply heavenly," and similar explosives lavished on the various items of the bewildering array that Aunt Effie's taste and Uncle Fred's prodigality had heaped upon their beloved Nan; and Freeman spent most of his unoccupied hours,—which were few enough,—whimsically describing the domestic chaos to his chums at the store; and as for Blake,—Blake fluttered about the post "like a hen with her head cut off," said Foster, nervous, restless, excited, irrepressible, and utterly absurd. One thing had been resolved upon,—neither Nan nor her blissful groom was to be allowed to set foot in the chapel until the

decorations were complete; neither one was to be allowed to see it until the moment of the ceremony.

"How on earth do you suppose I can see it, then?" asked Blake. "My head is aswim already." But Mrs. Atherton was in charge, and not an inch of her position would she abandon. Wednesday noon had been settled upon as the time, the new chapel as the place, and Mr. Hughes as the officiating priest. The rector had at first demurred. He thought the wedding should come off at his own little sanctuary in town, but it was promptly pointed out to him that it would not begin to hold the invited guests, and could not be decorated as was desired. Mrs. Morris assured her Cheyenne cronies that she had it from the best authority that the real reason was that if the wedding came off at the church they could not well exclude Mrs. Leavitt from her pew, should she be brazen enough to insist on coming; but Mrs. Morris was stupefied when told that Mrs. Leavitt had just received the most gorgeous toilet to be worn on that occasion, and that Judge and Mrs. Leavitt's invitation included both the ceremony and the reception. This, said Mrs. Morris, was simply incredible. But she was not half as much amazed as was Madeleine Leavitt herself when that invitation came. Was it possible that the packet she had sent had failed to reach its destination? She could not call upon the bride-elect and inquire, because she was visiting at the Freemans', and Mrs. Freeman would never recognize her, except by a cold and distant bow, and had never crossed her threshold since the early days at the depot. But just about ten days before the wedding Mrs. Crawford and Miss Bryan were reported making certain

visits in town, and Madeleine Leavitt sallied forth to play her last card. They met in Major Thorpe's parlor, where the paymaster's wife was holding court. Mrs. Crawford freezingly acknowledged Mrs. Leavitt's enchanting smile of greeting, and Nannie's big brown eyes flashed a challenge that would have daunted women less determined. It would have been easy to avoid further meeting, but the blood of the Bryans was up, and Nan deliberately threw herself in Mrs. Leavitt's way.

"It is the first opportunity I have had of tendering my congratulations in person, Miss Bryan," said the elder lady, with that indescribable smile, but with a lazy, dangerous drawl in her words. "Yet I think you received them with the little packet I sent you, did you not?" And from under the white lids with their long, sweeping lashes she fixes her hungry eyes upon the fair, flushing face. She had thought to down a rival so young, so inexperienced; but she never dreamed the fight in Nannie Bryan's blood until this day,—and never dared it afterwards.

"Receive them, Mrs. Leavitt? Oh, yes, and passed them on with the packet to Captain Blake. You know he had told me all about it long before."

"Pretty good for a girl not out of her teens!" boomed old Stannard when told the story that night; for at least three women had breathlessly heard and eagerly repeated the words. It was conceded on all sides that Mrs. Leavitt had met with signal and disastrous defeat in the very first round. There were dozens of good people both in town and at the fort who held that after that episode it would be simply

impossible to invite her to the wedding. But a judge of the Federal Court was not a personage to be ignored.

"And what is more," said Nannie to her aunt and to Mrs. Freeman, "if Mrs. Atherton has no objection to receiving her in her parlors, I simply *want* her to see our wedding." And so the matter was settled.

And then that wondrous Wednesday came, with a soft breeze blowing gently from the south, as though the blustering gales, that time and again had buffeted the girlish form, had now withdrawn their winged furies, that naught but peace and gladness and smiling sunshine should attend her wedding morn. And long before noon the carriages began coming out across the prairie, and ladies in charming toilets were flitting from house to house, and officers in full uniform began to appear upon the piazzas, and a throng of nurse-maids, children, and womenfolk from "Sudsville" to gather about the chapel doors, where six-foot troopers guarded the way and suffered none to enter until the appointed time. And by and by the ushers, too, began to cluster at the door and to peep in and exclaim, "By Jove!" after the manner of men whose adjectives were unequal to the task of description. And Foster, though he wore the willow, had put a brave face upon his secret disappointment and turned out as one of the selected six. And over on their barrack-porch Blake's troop were mustering in their brightest garb, and here and there among the Riflers, soldierly fellows in the neat, dark blue, belted and gloved, were gathering into squads; for Blake declared that every man who had stood by him in the stirring hours at the Manitou should be with him in the joyous ceremony of the

day. And under the broad awning of tent-flies stretched from curb to chapel door the carriage-loads from town were received upon the arms of waiting officers and marched between the statuesque sentries and into the bower-like interior, where they were shown to seats already designated, and where they exchanged appreciative nods and commentaries on the beauty of the decorations. And—was it collusion?—Mrs. Granger Leavitt on Corry's arm was conducted to one of the seats well up the aisle, where smilingly she signalled to her following liege to enter first, that she might sit at the very end nearest the bridal party. And here she stood a moment displaying another gorgeous gown, and sweetly, smilingly arching her eyebrows and distributing nods and greetings about the hall. And then the post people began to reach the entrance, and to be escorted to their places, and there were murmurs of admiration when the Truscotts and their guests, the Rays, came in together, preceded by Master Jack convoying little Sandy, who was just about able to toddle; and if Mrs. Ray had grown a trifle stouter, the new toilet disguised the fact astonishingly. And Mrs. Leavitt's eyes devoured each item of that gown, even when she comprehended both the captains in a ravishing smile. And presently, one after another, all the families of the garrison were ushered in, and the clink of sword and rattle of scabbard could be heard on every side, and the children were eagerly huddling together and whispering, and everybody was looking about and exchanging greetings, and exclaiming over the beauty of the scene and the marvellous change wrought in the appearance of the long spare room;

and then the martial tramp of marching feet could be heard, and in came the column of sturdy soldiery, "doughboys" and dragoons united, the same fellows who fought so fiercely to hold the pass till Stannard's coming. And so, little by little as the minute hand crept round towards twelve, every nook and corner except the aisle and chancel had its eager occupants, and who that saw it could forget the picture?

Overhead and on every side, fastened to light invisible scaffolding, the ceilings and the walls were hidden in a bower of pine and cedar and evergreen, the sombre coloring tempered and contrasted by the brilliant hues of dozens of cavalry guidons, gay flags of silk and bunting, and glittering stars and crosses formed by the flashing steel of hundreds of sabres. Festoons of evergreen hung in graceful loops from every window to the beams in the vaulted roof. Forward, towards the extemporized chancel railing, hidden in smilax and studded with cavalry plumes, a light archway had been thrown, covered thickly with its coating of twigs and evergreen, and the clinging tendrils of vine. Knots of bridal ribbon in purest white looped back the thick festoons that hung about the arch and displayed to view a raised dais or platform, carpeted with richest green. Here and there and everywhere around the chancel peeped clusters of yellow roses and the yellow ripples of the troopers' plumes. Back of the chancel, against the westward wall, upon a solid bank of green, was the badge of the regiment with its number and the letter of Blake's troop, all formed from glistening spurs that had been polished like mirrors by whole companies of enthusiastic soldiers. Stacks of the

Riflers' arms, suspending polished belts and pouches, stood on both sides of the chancel and peeped from the bower of green. Copper bugles and brazen trumpets hung glittering from the leafy archway; and, under the great device of the crossed sabres, flanked by silken guidons, stood the standard of the —th.

And now of a sudden there comes a burst of melody. The band of the regiment, stationed without the canvas portals, crashes full upon the ear in the wondrous harmonies of Wagner. There is immediate turning of eyes towards the wide open doors. Mrs. Freeman, lovely in a soft, creamy toilet, comes flushed and smiling up the aisle, leaning on her tall husband's arm, and slips into the seat next the Athertons' nearest the chancel rail. Mr. Hughes, the rector, emerges from behind the leafy screen and advances to the edge of the dais. An instant latter Blake appears, stalking forth from the opposite side, and, his dark eyes aglow, his face very white, takes his stand so near to Mrs. Freeman that she can almost hear the thumping of his heart. Just behind him, as best man, and, of course, in full-dress uniform, is Tommy Hollis, and Tom smiles blandly over the assemblage, as much at home as the groom is at sea. Blake bites at his moustache on one side, at his upper lip on the other, shifts from the right foot to the left, loses control of his hands, and looks for the moment the picture of desolation. Louder and more joyous rings the music from without, and now it floats into the rhythmic strains of the wedding march from Lohengrin, during the murmur of excited joy with which the assemblage greets the coming bride. First there is a bonny little pair, a brave-faced boy

and girl, both with deep blue eyes and fair waving hair, hers falling in shimmering wavelets down her back. Straight and well and bravely they march, stepping like little soldiers in perfect time to the stirring strains, and Freeman's eyes, that never blinked through all the sulphur clouds of Chickamauga's fiercest hour, glisten "with that wet badge of weak humanity" that seems ready to overflow in the softer orbs of the fair wife and mother who stands at his side. Dot and Harry are indeed there to lead their beloved Prairie Nan to her waiting groom, and they glance quickly up into the father's face as they reach their stations, confident of the "well done" that trembles on his lips. He turns abruptly and scowls at the stack of rifles in front, ashamed of his momentary weakness, forgetful that "there are no faces truer than those that are so washed." Mr. Corry comes next, escorting Amy Waldron, the major's eldest daughter, who has rapturously embraced the opportunity of appearing for the first time in a long dress as Nannie's maid of honor. And Mr. Foster has given Mrs. Crawford his arm, and the other ushers hang back well down the aisle, because there is not room for more in a tableau that would be effective. And then, leaning on her uncle's arm, her lovely veiled head gently bent, but the soft, brown eyes looking straight before her, comes our prairie flower, and all else is forgotten as people gaze upon her. Blake steps forward with extended hand, looking solemn as an owl when all the time his heart is bounding, and as she quits her guardian's arm and puts her slender, white-gloved hand in his, her soft eyes beam upon him, the flush deepens on her rounded

cheek and a tremulous little smile plays an instant about her lips. To his unspeakable relief, Blake at last can turn his back upon the congregation and face only the white-robed priest. He hears as in a daze the opening words of the beautiful service. He cannot help thinking just how Billy Ray looked—how long ago it seems now—when he in his turn faced the music and seemed to challenge any man living now to speak or else forever hold his peace. He is astonished to find the needed words "I will" imbedded so far down in his throat that only by supreme effort does he resurrect them ere it is too late. He marvels at Nan's composure, though he notes the tremor in the sweet, bell-like tone of her voice. He has a half-defined idea that perhaps at the very last moment Crawford will revoke, and is immeasurably relieved when that gentleman steps promptly forward to give the bride away. The *basso cantante* that made the Manitou resound with his rallying-cry is only a husky shadow of itself to-day, as he blindly follows Mr. Hughes in the solemn giving of his troth. Not until he comes to "love and to cherish until death us do part" does its ring and resonance return. He half turns and looks into her softly flushing face, as again her silvery tones seem to quiver over the hushed and reverent throng. He wishes for the thousandth time he had the man by the throat who introduced that paragraph in the matrimonial tactics that prescribes that he should audibly endow with all his worldly goods the fair girl who stands there by his side. He could swear that some of those graceless boys are winking at each other at this very instant, and he longs to punch Ross's thick

head. He vows he'll do it, too. Even in this solemn moment he cannot shut out the recollection of the chaffing the youngsters have indulged in on that score, but the reverent tones of Mr. Hughes recall him to worthier thoughts as the words of that beautiful prayer fall upon his ear. He hears with something akin to awe the solemn announcement, "They are man and wife." He totally forgets to unhook his sabre when they kneel to receive that most beautiful of all blessings in the ritual. The clattering thing gets in his way just as Ray had bet him that it would unless Tommy Hollis thought to whisper the command "Prepare to mount." And then there comes a solemn pause, and then a rustling and rising, a glorious flood of melody from without as the band bursts into that loveliest march of Mendelssohn's. He finds his feet somehow, but has utterly lost his head. Hughes is holding forth a cordial hand. Nannie is smiling up into his glowing eyes. He faces about in obedience to her signal and confronts again the gazing throng. No need to bother himself on their account, for all eyes are fixed on her, not him—all, save one pair, brilliant and beautiful and heavily-lashed, and almost the first thing that arrests his half-bewildered gaze is this intent, almost scornful, look in Madeleine Leavitt's insolently smiling face. Nothing could have been more opportune! In one instant every nerve is braced, every faculty alert. Pride, love, joy, happiness ineffable, beam in his speaking face as he bends one look beneath the flimsy veil now backward thrown, and then with elastic step he leads his sweet wife, blushing and beautiful, down that guarded aisle, a lane of fair, fond faces,

of smiling, shining eyes, of stalwart, soldierly men, of loyal, steadfast friends, rich with welcome for his bonny bride, and so out into the music and the sunshine of the early summertide beyond.

And now the clans are gathered at the colonel's, and all the bidden guests are marshalled there to tender their congratulations, and Blake's wits begin slowly to reassemble in his whirling brain, and he has time to note how infinitely lovely Nannie looks in her bridal garb, and then to lead her to their station at the upper end of the double parlor, and to grip Tommy Hollis's hand with both hands, and to whisper a word in Mrs. Freeman's little pink ear that makes her soft eyes dance. And then, as Hollis aligns the party in semi-circle, and first of all the colonel and his radiant wife step forward to tender their felicitations, and the rapidly-arriving guests are ranged by the ushers in column of twos, there is a general ripple of delight as the regimental commander bends gravely forward and presses his lips on Nannie's soft and rounded cheek.

"Welcome to the —th, Mrs. Blake," he smilingly says; and so for the first time is she hailed by her new name.

"Welcome to the —th, Nan, dear," echoes Freeman, who happens to be the next man, as he, too, bends and kisses her.

"Welcome to all our hearts, Nan, darling," murmurs Mrs. Freeman, as for an instant the two clasp and cling to each other and part with swimming eyes.

"Welcome, thrice welcome to the —th, Mrs. Blake," exclaims Hollis, darting from his place by Amy Waldron's side. "Of course in the same way, I mean,"

he laughs, as he, too, would have bent and kissed the flushing cheek; but Mrs. Freeman interposes:

"Indeed you shan't, sir. Every man in the regiment will be wanting to next."

"*Will* be wanting to! Heavens! they want to now," is Tommy's quick rejoinder. "Why did Freeman begin if there wasn't enough to go round?" But Tommy has to give way to the Stannards and Waldrons, who will brook no longer delay, and then come Jack Truscott and his lovely wife.

"Surely I can bid you welcome to the old regiment, Nan," says Mrs. Grace, "since I was almost born and reared under the standard." And Mrs. Ray has charming congratulations for her Will's devoted friend and his sweet bride; and how those fellows wring Blake's firm hands, and how they look into each other's eyes, as man after man they come to wish him joy. And what laughter and mirth there is when Mrs. Wilkins calls him "Jurrld," and reminds him that she's always been like a mother to him. And Mrs. Wilkins is by no means the only one whose voice is lowered and whose eyes are eager and alert when Mrs. Leavitt comes beaming through the crowd, leaning on Foster's arm. Infinite is the grace with which she bends forward to clasp the hand of the bride; bewitching is her smile.

"Need I say how heartily I wish you joy?" she exclaims, and then, with sudden turn, "and you, too, Captain Gerald; you luckiest of men!" Nan receives her greeting with an ease that charms all lookers-on. She is talking laughingly with Mrs. Hayne as the judge's stately dame draws nigh; she is laughing still

when she bends to acknowledge Mrs. Leavitt's honeyed words. She laughs blithely, looking straight in those half-veiled eyes, answering,—

"Need I tell you how fully I appreciate your kind wishes?—Gerald, dear, Mrs. Leavitt." And then, laughing still, she turns back to Mrs. Hayne, who, being a young woman of equal nerve and spirit, could have hugged her then and there.

But Blake's fingers will not even close upon the hand she extends to his. Hollis, watching her coming, has slipped away, ostensibly to fetch a glass of water for Miss Amy, who needs nothing of the kind. Blake bows low before the woman who had once enthralled him, merely taking her hand and murmuring her name, turns instantly to her husband who follows grimly in her wake, and gives to him a really friendly greeting.

"Judge, I'm glad to see you with us. Foster, please present Mrs. Leavitt to Mr. and Mrs. Crawford," and turns quickly away to welcome the next comer, while Madeleine passes on, looking winsomely into Foster's face and smiling,—indomitably smiling; while the band, stationed now on the grass-plat just outside the parlor windows, begins witchingly the Lorelei prelude to "Am Schönen Rhein." Smilingly, graciously, she makes the round of the wedding-party, exchanging bright sallies and distributing flattering words to every listening ear. And then she releases Foster and resumes her husband's arm, and so, gradually, she makes her triumphant way to the lower end of the crowded rooms, and out into the hall beyond. Still laughing, chatting, all grace and gladness, she guides him to the open

door, and so on to where her carriage waits. She will not stay to take part in the wedding-feast. Not until the eastern gate is passed and the open prairie is before them,—the joyous garrison left behind,—does that indomitable smile follow such joy as ever lived in her selfish heart, and, vanishing, gives place to black-browed envy and dejection

And now the laughing throng is gathered about the colonel's board or scattered all around the halls and doorway, and every voice is stilled but one, and all ears are intent as, glass in hand, Atherton says his brief, soldierly but telling words, bidding the newly-wedded pair God-speed. And on every side they are drinking Nannie's health and happiness, and every man is calling for Blake. Slowly he rises by her side, a film in his honest eyes, a tremor in his earnest voice. For an instant he seems to falter, as though he knew not how to begin, but one look down into her face, so full of joy and hope and pride and confidence, sends the blood a-tingle through his veins and nerves him to his task. Time and again he has ranted for them, jibed and jested and won their laughter and applause; but he cannot jest to-day. His heart is full to overflowing.

"You don't know how many things I long to say to you; if you did you never would have called on me to speak; but much as you have suffered from my travesties in the past, you need this time have no fear. You have borne with me so many a long year, one and all, in fair weather and foul, through good report and ill. You have been the most indulgent friends, and some of you"—and here his eyes soften as they fall for an

instant on Mrs. Freeman's face—"the best and truest friends man could ever hope to have, and, long as I may live, I shall love to recall these last two years at Russell. I have never known such pride in the dear old —th, such fellowship and affection for any other regiment as I feel, and ought to feel, for our comrades of the Riflers. But, as for those who are our help-meets here, the fondest words man ever wrote or dreamed would fail me in the tribute that my heart would pay. Time and again in the old days we gathered about the camp-fires and drank to sweethearts and wives. Time was when woman in becoming wife seemed to forfeit forevermore the tender name of sweetheart, but where to-day are women sweethearts longer?—where are there faces that grow lovelier with every coming year?—where are there wives who win with every changing season new love, new reverence, new devotion from their lords as do those in our very midst, where they are ever sweethearts and wives in one. With wistful eyes I've watched the happiness of many a comrade, never dreaming that the day was soon to come when in all our broad land there would live no man whom I could envy. And now at last I can indeed see and know and—

> "'Bless the light given,
> To lead me to "life's late achievement,"'

in her whom you know so fondly and so well it would be useless for me to tell of her perfections. Only this, that as my heart wells up in gratitude to you for all the friendship and sympathy and forgiveness that have

sustained me in the past, it seems to throb the very words of Valentine,—

> "'Why, man, she is mine own:
> And I as rich in having such a jewel,
> As twenty seas, if all their sand were pearl.'"

"Who ever dreamed that Blake could be serious for a moment?" asks Mrs. Wilkins, in her neighbor's ear, the moment the long round of applause has sufficiently subsided to permit her query to be heard.

"I did," says Mrs. Freeman, stoutly. "He has a heart as tender and a nature as deep as any man I know, and Nan has found it, and will hold it, too."

They say she has. There is silver in the thinning threads of his dark hair. There are deeper lines about the twinkling, humorous eyes. It is ten long years since that glorious day when they drove forth from the old east gate with all the garrison showering rice and slippers and blessings on their heads. There is many a new face in the quarters of the —th. There are some that can never grow old, for they live in memory alone. But in all their wanderings from point to point, each station has seemed brighter, dearer than the last, for Blake looks ever out upon the changing world as though he saw it through younger eyes,—the deep, serene, and lustrous eyes of his devoted wife.

FINIS.

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